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INTEGRATED MARKETING APPROACH AND NATIONAL BRANDING AS COVID-19 CRISIS RESPONSE IN TOURISM SECTOR

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Abstract: The subject of this paper is the analysis of the impact of COVID-19 crisis on the tourism sector at the global level and in the Western Balkans. The paper aims to identify the basic directions of action to combat the negative effects of the crisis, as well as to provide relevant guidelines for policy and decision-makers worldwide. With that regard, the standard desk-research method in combination with the case study method and expert method analysis was conducted. The research results, both primary and secondary, emphasized the importance of integration on all levels, digitalization, and innovations as well as building and further developing strong national and regional brands.

Keywords: competitiveness, integrated marketing approach, national branding, travel and tourism sector, COVID-19 crisis

TRAVEL AND TOURISM SECTOR: GLOBAL MARKET OVERVIEW

The outbreak of COVID-19 crisis represents a crucial and evolving challenge to global economic growth and prosperity. The twin threats to lives and livelihoods have affected sales, profit margins and growth rates of enterprises all over the world

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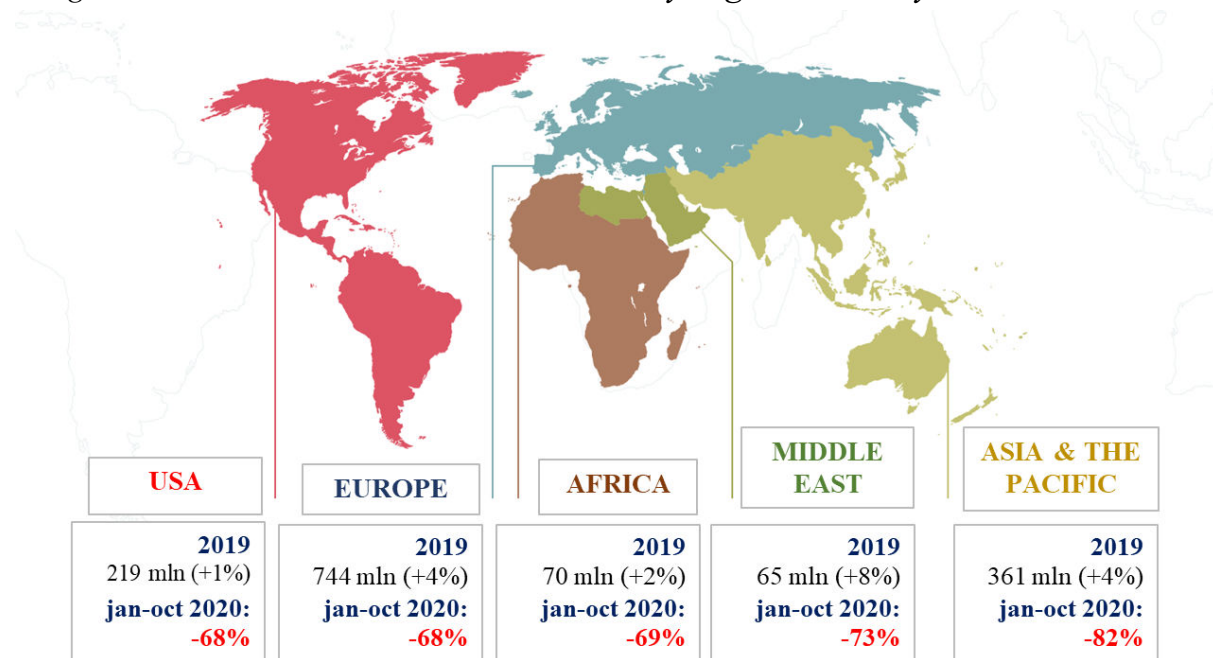
(Lazić et al., 2021). The sectors most affected are those where a relatively high proportion of consumer spending involves face-to-face contact and/or social activity as well as those that are most influenced by government restrictions (Bank of England, 2020).

Taking into account the global economic outlook, containment of the pandemic represents the top priority of the travel and tourism sector which is among the most affected sectors with a massive fall of international demand due to global travel restrictions including many borders fully closed (UNWTO, 2020). According to the latest data released (UNWTO International Tourism Barometer, 2020), it is estimated that in the first ten months of 2020 the number of overall international tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) fell by 72 percent in comparison to the same period last year which represents 900 million fewer international tourist arrivals on a global level compared to the same period previous year, and translates into a loss of US\$ 935 billion in export revenues from international tourism, more than 10 times the loss in 2009.

The pandemic has significantly affected every sector of the travel and tourism industry: airlines, transportation, cruise lines, hotels, restaurants, attractions, travel agencies, tour operators, and online travel organizations (Aburumman, 2020).

Regional distribution of losses in the travel and tourism sector (approximated by decreasing percentage of international tourists' arrivals) has been presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. International tourists' arrivals by region, January – October 2020.



Source: UNWTO (2020), UNWTO World Tourism Barometer.

Based on the latest developments regarding quarantine measures, travel bans, border closures as well as the patterns of previous crises UNWTO (UNWTO International Tourism Barometer, 2020) expects international arrivals to decline by

70 percent to 75 percent for the whole of 2020. The estimated decline in international tourism in 2020 has a tendency to translate into an unprecedented economic loss of over US\$ 2 trillion in global GDP, more than 2 percent of the world's GDP in 2019. Furthermore, economic losses caused by COVID-19 crisis tend to cut a million of jobs in the travel and tourism industry.

Along with the decreased volume of the outbound tourism (exemptions from this rule would be the USA, Germany, and France which have shown slightly recovery in the recent months), domestic tourism continues to grow in countries like China and Russia, where it is estimated that domestic air travel demand has returned to the pre-COVID levels.

Looking ahead, the outlook for the travel and tourism sector remains uncertain. Projections for the travel and tourism sector (UN, 2020) indicate that international tourist numbers could decline by 58 percent to 78 percent in 2020, which would translate into a decline in visitor spending from \$1.5 trillion in 2019 to between \$310 and \$570 billion in 2020. In the most positive of the three scenarios it is assumed that travel restrictions would be abolished in July 2021 (Richter, 2021).

In response to COVID-19 crisis outbreak and the imposed social distancing measures, many World Heritage properties are currently closed (DUNC, 2020) which had huge negative economic impact on the local communities as well as social and cultural life of people all around the globe.

The travel and tourism sector represents development opportunities, promotes solidarity and understanding beyond borders, while at the same time domestic tourism helps to foster cohesion within nations (DUNC, 2020). Nowadays this tremendously important sector is facing one of the biggest challenges striving to recover its position in the years to come. Accordingly, this paper aims to evaluate the current conditions in the travel and tourism sector and to propose the integrated marketing approach and marketing strategies to suppress negative effects of the global pandemic.

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to provide relevant guidelines for policy and decision-makers worldwide, the authors of this paper combined the standard desk research method - the analysis and comparison of secondary data with the case study method and expert method analysis. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques allowed authors to obtain more comprehensive and thorough research results and consequently propose more adequate measures.

With that regard, 10 in-depth online interviews with selected top executives of the travel and tourism sector in Serbia were conducted in the period January – February 2021. The main research tool used for this purpose was a short semi-structured questionnaire design to better understand the overall sentiment in the

global tourism sector and the Balkan regions as well as already implemented and planned marketing strategies designed to suppress negative crisis impact.

The results of conducted primary research and thorough desk research indicate the following conclusions:

1. Importance of the integration of international organizations on a global level. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), its Member States, the World Health Organization (WHO), and tourism industry are working together to provide a coordinated and effective response to the ongoing health crisis. Cooperation on the international level seems to be of crucial importance both in the first phase (the period during the crisis) and the second phase (the recovery phase). Furthermore, coordinated actions across governments at all levels and the private sector are as well mandatory.

The integration at all levels with the aim to suppress negative impact of global pandemic on the tourism sector is essential as the global community has only ten years to reach the 17 Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda (DUNC, 2020).

2. Increased implementation of digital technologies in the first phase (during the COVID-19 crisis). During the last couple of decades, the internet has played a significant role in the overall marketing communication strategy of enterprises all over the world. What makes it specific compared to any other communication channel is its interactivity, transparency, and the ability to store information (Gurau, 2008). By its interactivity, internet marketing has proved to be an adequate tool for almost every organization or product (Domazet & Lazić, 2017).

During the current health crisis, the number of internet users has increased significantly. According to Global Digital Overview (DataReportal, 2021) report, at the beginning of 2021 approximately 4.66 billion people around the world use the internet (60 percent of the world's total population). The results indicate that 319 million new users came online over the past twelve months.

The increased number of internet users represents a huge opportunity for the key actors in the travel and tourism sector. For example, UNESCO and many other institutions are currently providing digital solutions directly from home in order for learning and exploring to be continued despite social distancing and travel restrictions (DUNC, 2020). The world's most popular cultural heritages are promoting via social networks and online tour booking.

3. The health crisis represents the opportunity for domestic tourism. Even though COVID-19 crisis makes outbound tourism highly vulnerable, demand for domestic travel is soaring as travelers look for close-to-home, lower-risk holiday options (Guillot, 2020). The travel and tourism sector should capitalize on this fact in order to drive/maintain profitability and retain guest loyalty.

Furthermore, as people who live in particular country represent the best nation ambassadors (Lazić, 2019) the health crisis may prove itself to be the opportunity for nations to build and strengthen national identity as well as to develop more integrated and coherent national branding strategies for the forthcoming period.

4. Joint branding strategies on the regional level.

Analogous to global trends, COVID-19 crisis took the highest toll on the travel and tourism sector in the Western Balkans which made it particularly vulnerable. The most popular destination in 2019 (pre-COVID period) in the Western Balkans was Montenegro (67) followed by Serbia (83) and Albania (86) (Table 1).

Table 1. The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019, Overall Rank

Country (sorted by alphabetical order)	Rank (of 140)
Albania	86
Bosnia and Herzegovina	105
Montenegro	67
North Macedonia	101
Serbia	83

Source: World Economic Forum (2019), The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019, p. 65.

According to the latest projections (The World Bank, 2020) economic activity in the region is projected to contract by 4.8 percent in 2020. Considering the fact that tourism directly contributes to 15% of the overall region's GDP (OECD, 2020) it is of substantial importance to help it recover in the years to come.

Taking into account the above mentioned and according to the results of the research conducted in this study, the greatest potential for the development of the regional brand of the Western Balkans is represented by (1) popular touristic destinations; (2) natural resources and attractions; (3) cultural heritage and (4) popular events and manifestations.

5. Integrated marketing approach and digital communications on all levels.

For national values (which predominantly determine the number of international tourist arrivals) to be successfully communicated to global community, marketing efforts must be integrated and mutually coordinated. In other words, the implementation of an effective national branding strategy in the function of tourism development requires a special form of communication between the country and the domestic and foreign public, which emphasizes the application of the concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC). IMC implies the concept of planning marketing activities based on the realization of added value through the integration and synergistic action of various strategic activities such as advertising (propaganda),

direct marketing, sponsorship, PR, and digital communications (Domazet et al., 2018).

Accordingly, IMC should be the basis of the future communication strategy for tourism development. In doing so, IMC ought to be designed in a way to connect all aspects of a country's marketing communications to create a positive, pre-planned national image (Domazet, 2016). In addition to the application of the IMC concept, which should serve as a basis, the emphasis within the communication strategy of tourist destinations in the coming period should be placed on digital technologies. Within digital technologies, mobile technologies have made a kind of boom in recent years. If an individual is left without a mobile phone, at the same time (s)he is left without contacts, pictures, files, and in such situations (s)he often feels lost. It is this dependence on digital technologies, despite market saturation, that offers huge potential for tourism promotion (especially domestic one).

Recovery packages should capitalize on the usage of technology in the tourism ecosystem, further promotion of digitalization in order to boost innovations and investment in digital skills.

CONCLUSION

The outbreak of COVID-19 crisis represents a crucial and evolving challenge to global economic growth and prosperity as well as the opportunity for global community to rethink the world for the future. Decisions made today will shape our world tomorrow.

Tourism is at a crossroad. The key elements that sustainable tourism strategy for the forthcoming period should be based on are considered to be integration, digitalization, and innovations, as well as the building and further development of strong national and regional brands.

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THE ROLE OF GASTRONOMIC MANIFESTATIONS IN IMPROVING TOURISM DESTINATION OFFER¹⁰

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Abstract: Manifestations are the part of tourism destination offer that can have a primary role in attracting tourists, but also can be created as an additional attraction in the destination. Among the main elements of tourism offer of destination is food. Many tourism destinations develop gastronomic tourism, usually due to the unique value of their cuisine and promotion of their traditional dishes, gastronomic skills, and food products. The aim of this paper is to present the role of gastronomic manifestations for improving tourism offer of destination. In order to reach competitiveness tourism destinations should constantly adapt to changes on market and improve their offer. Gastronomic manifestations can be the way for tourism destinations to promote better the unique values of one of their primary element of offer that food and beverage.

Keywords: gastronomic manifestations, tourism destination, manifestations, tourism offer

Introduction

One of the key concepts in tourism is a tourism destination, although on how tourism destination should be defined, researchers and practitioners still disagree (Saraniemi, Kylänen, 2011). Buhalis (2000) states that: "destinations are amalgams of tourist products that offer an integrated experience for the consumers". According to Bakić (2005) "tourism destination is a large or small geographical unit that has attractive, accessibility and receptive elements, ie. all those natural, social,

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