

FACEBOOK PROMOTION OF THE GREAT SPA TOWNS OF EUROPE BY THE NTOs

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Abstract:

Eleven spa towns developed around natural mineral water sources located in seven countries across Europe, known as the Great Spa Towns of Europe, were inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List in July 2021. This paper offers research on the frequency of promoting those towns on Facebook by their respective NTOs during the period of three years. The research showed that all the analysed NTOs rarely promoted spa & wellness tourism in their Facebook posts. In addition, the Great Spa Towns of Europe were the most promoted spa & wellness destination only in case of NTOs of Belgium and Czechia, while some of the analysed countries did not promote their Great Spa Towns of Europe in any of their Facebook posts.

Keywords:

Wellness and spa tourism, Great spa town, national tourism organization, Facebook promotion.

INTRODUCTION: INFLUENCE OF MEDICAL CRISIS ON TOURISM

Mineral water springs have been enjoyed by humankind and used for well-being for thousands of years, with the earliest trace of their exploitation dating back to nearly 3000 BC (Kazakov and Oyner, 2020). The growing popularity of a healthy lifestyle concept shaped at the beginning of the twentieth century (Dima-Cozma *et al.*, 2014), led to health tourism gaining even greater importance. Alongside growing concern about the health issues, the need for alleviating stress and getting away from the everyday routine have also paved the way to health tourism expansion (Dwyer *et al.*, 2009; Heung and Kucukusta, 2013; Medina-Muñoz and Medina-Muñoz, 2013). Recently, the tourism sector has been severely damaged by the Covid 19 pandemic, but its full impact has not yet been determined. However, the newly formed crisis can offer the possibility of emergence of new opportunity scenarios, such as development of tourism models not associated with massification and overtourism, but with sustainability (Pinos Navarrete and Shaw, 2021). Therein lies the growing potential of health tourism whose products are not associated with mass tourism (Fletcher *et al.*, 2019), but also invoke the possibility of helping with the healing process and reducing the effects of the illness (Pinos Navarrete and Shaw, 2021). On the other hand, the information-intensive tourism market

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supported by the development of ICT, use of the Internet and social networks for the purpose of promoting and selling tourism services necessary for travel and stay in a tourism destination point to the now intense tourist demand that uses the Internet and social media for planning their holiday. Tourism organizations and DMO make destination products available on the online/electronic tourism market. At this point, the aim of this paper is to find out how many NTOs are involved in social media activities to position spa destinations in the minds of tourists and encourage them to visit. Eleven Great Spa Towns and associated NTOs were selected for the analysis in this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Travelling for health reasons has been recognised as one of the oldest travel motivators (Chen *et al.*, 2013; Smith and Kelly, 2006). Accordingly, dynamic development of health tourism has been recorded in the last decade at both national and international levels (Heung and Kucukusta, 2013). Tourism related literature does not offer a single definition of the term health tourism accepted by the academia, but it can be considered as tourism related to people traveling from their place of residence to any leisure destination for health-related purposes (Connell, 2006; Han and Hwang, 2013; Musa *et al.*, 2012). One of the vital parts of health tourism is wellness tourism, the term coined in the middle of the last century consisting of the words “well-being” and “fitness” (Chen *et al.*, 2013). However, Hudson *et al.* (2017) argue that only a small segment of tourists engaging in wellness tourism are those who travel for wellness purposes only, while for the majority of tourists wellness is only one part of their overall tourism activities.

Wellness tourism includes a wide range of facilities, ranging from day spas to lifestyle and spiritual retreats (Hudson *et al.*, 2017; Voigt *et al.*, 2011). Spa commonly refers to water-based facilities offering a range of treatments for wellness, health, beauty, and relaxation (Han *et al.*, 2020). Recently, the term “spa” has become almost exclusively linked to body pampering treatments and not necessarily to water-based and healing regimens (Hudson *et al.*, 2017; Joppe, 2010). However, this paper refers only to traditional spas, which according to Tabacchi (2010) offer preventive medical treatments and combine water-based regimens with other destination spa activities. More precisely, the focus of this paper are eleven spa towns located in seven countries across Europe, known as the Great Spa Towns of Europe, inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List in July 2021 (UNESCO, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

To determine the importance given to the Great Spa Towns of Europe by their respective National tourism organizations (NTOs), which can be considered cornerstones of the tourism marketing systems of every country (Zlatanov and Popescu, 2021), this paper offers research on the frequency of promoting the abovementioned spa towns on Facebook by the NTOs of Austria, Belgium,¹ Czechia, France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. The research includes all posts published by the mentioned NTOs on their official Facebook pages from January 1st, 2018 to December 31st, 2020. Quantitative content analysis used by numerous authors researching online communication between tourists and NTOs (Hays *et al.*, 2013; Mariani *et al.*, 2016; Molina *et al.*, 2020) was selected as the primary research method. Firstly, the frequency of promoting spa and wellness tourism was determined. Secondly, the frequency of promoting the Great Spa Towns of Europe was analysed. Finally, the most frequently promoted spa and wellness tourism destinations were established.

¹ In Belgium there is no official NTO, but there are two regional tourism organisations, Tourist office of Flanders and Tourist office of Wallonia. Since the town of Spa is located in Wallonia, the official Facebook page of the regional tourism organisation (RTO) of Wallonia was analysed.



RESULTS

The frequency of posting on Facebook differs greatly among the analysed NTOs. During the period of three years, NTO of Italy published the highest number of posts, while NTO of Czechia published the least. However, when it comes to the promotion of spa & wellness tourism, NTO of Czechia used the highest number of their posts to promote this type of tourism, while the NTO of the United Kingdom used the lowest number of posts for promoting spa & wellness tourism. The number of posts published during the analysis period and the frequency of promoting spa & wellness tourism is shown in Table 1 in more detail. In addition, the frequency of promoting the Great Spa Towns of Europe within the posts dedicated to promoting spa & wellness tourism is shown in the Ttable 1.

Table 1. Promotion of of spa & wellness tourism and the great spa towns of europe

	Austria	Belgium	Czechia	France	Germany	Italy	United Kingdom
Number of posts / Average per day	912 / 0,83	1141 / 1	547 / 0,5	1819 / 1,66	1062 / 0,97	2198/ 2	769 / 0,7
Promotion of spa & wellness tourism	11 posts (1,2%)	18 posts (1,6%)	21 posts (3,8%)	12 posts (0,7%)	16 posts (1,5%)	16 posts (0,7%)	5 posts (0,6%)
Promotion of the Great Spa Towns of Europe	0% Baden bei Wien	61% Spa	52,8% Karlovy Vary 24% Mariánské Lázně 9,6% Františkovy Lázně	8,3% Vichy	6,3% Baden-Baden 0% Bad Ems 0% Bad Kissingen	12,5 % Montecatini Terme	20% City of Bath

Source: Author's analysis

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The results presented clearly show that spa & wellness tourism destinations and attractions are rarely promoted on the official Facebook pages of the seven analysed NTOs. Regarding the promotion of the Great Spa Towns of Europe, great differences can be noted between the countries. NTO of Czechia and RTO of Belgium promoted their respective Great Spa Towns of Europe more frequently than other spa towns. NTO of Italy, however, promoted Montecatini Terme in two posts only, and it must be noted that those two posts were not dedicated solely to the spa town in question, but to multiple spa towns in Tuscany. In addition, the most frequently promoted spa destination in Italy was not Montecatini Terme, but Cascade del Mulino. NTOs of France and the United Kingdom promoted their Great Spa Towns of Europe only once, as well as NTO of Germany that promoted Baden-Baden in one post only. The two other German Spa Towns of Europe were not promoted at all. NTOs of France and the United Kingdom did not promote any spa destination more frequently than the others, while NTO of Germany promoted Bad Homburg and Bad Saarow slightly more frequently. Finally, NTO of Austria did not use any of their posts to promote Baden bei Wien, but promoted Aqua Dome Hotel in 72,8% of the posts promoting spa & wellness tourism. Considering the contemporary need for stress alleviation and growing importance of a healthy lifestyle amid the continuing Covid-19 pandemic, more frequent promotion of spa & wellness tourism by the analysed NTOs on Facebook can be advised.



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