



THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON DMOS' PERCEPTION OF SUSTAINABILITY IN DESTINATIONS:

A RESEARCH NOTE

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ABSTRACT

Destination marketing and/or management organisations (DMOs) must manage crises that affect the image of the tourism destination. The use of communication in these scenarios is crucial. Recent studies suggest that, following the COVID-19 crisis, the demand for responsible tourism products should increase, leading to a more sustainable tourism. A study to examine the role of DMOs in responsible tourism during this crisis is underway to find out how the destination positioning is perceived in the current tourism context and what developments in DMOs marketing strategy on sustainable tourism are taking place as a consequence of the crisis impact.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19 ▶ crisis ▶ destination marketing organization ▶ stakeholder involvement ▶ sustainable tourism.

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EL IMPACTO DE LA PANDEMIA DEL COVID-19 EN LA PERCEPCIÓN DE LOS DMOS SOBRE LA SOSTENIBILIDAD EN LOS DESTINOS: UNA NOTA DE INVESTIGACIÓN

RESUMEN

Las organizaciones de marketing y/o gestión de destinos (DMOs) deben gestionar las crisis que afectan a la imagen del destino turístico, y el uso de la comunicación en estos escenarios es crucial. Estudios recientes sugieren que, tras la crisis de COVID-19, la demanda de productos turísticos responsables debería aumentar, dando lugar a un turismo más sostenible. Se está llevando a cabo una investigación para examinar el papel de los DMOs en el turismo responsable durante la crisis actual, con el fin de conocer cómo perciben el posicionamiento del destino en el contexto turístico actual y qué novedades, como consecuencia del impacto de la crisis, se están produciendo en su estrategia de marketing sobre el turismo sostenible.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Covid-19 crisis ▶ organización de marketing de destinos ▶ participación de las partes interesadas ▶ turismo sostenible.

O IMPACTO DA PANDEMIA DA COVID-19 NA PERCEPÇÃO DOS DMOS SOBRE A SUSTENTABILIDADE NOS DESTINOS: UMA NOTA DE PESQUISA

RESUMO

As organizações de marketing e/ou gestão de destinos (DMOs) devem gerenciar crises que afetam a imagem do destino turístico, e o uso da comunicação nestes cenários é crucial. Estudos recentes sugerem que, após a crise da Covid-19, a demanda por produtos turísticos responsáveis deve aumentar, levando a um turismo mais sustentável. Estão sendo realizadas pesquisas para examinar o papel dos DMOs no turismo responsável durante a crise atual, a fim de descobrir como eles percebem o posicionamento do destino no contexto turístico atual e quais desenvolvimentos, como consequência (sem trema, novo acordo ortográfico) do impacto da crise, estão ocorrendo em sua estratégia de marketing no turismo sustentável.

PALAVRAS CHAVE

Covid-19 ▶ crise ▶ organização de marketing de destino participação ▶ atuação das partes interessadas ▶ turismo sustentável.



Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has had a significant impact on global activity, leading to a global economic recession (Bakar & Rosbi, 2020). Travel restrictions have immediately affected national economies, and international tourism has declined sharply (Gössling et al., 2020). It is understood that, before we return to our previous normality or to a “new normality”, there will be a phase of coexistence with the virus, in which travel attitudes and behaviour will be dramatically modified (Rivera García & Pastor Ruiz, 2020). In addition, the pandemic effects appear to encourage the public to engage in activities in natural settings and on an individual basis due to the risk of infection through contact and crowding (García et al., 2020). Some of these new characteristics are entirely in line with the better-known characteristics of sustainable tourism and ecotourism (Rivera García & Pastor Ruiz, 2020).

Crises are perceived as an opportunity to critically rethink the growth trajectory of tourism (Gössling et al., 2020). In seeking to return to the normal trajectory or to reach a new one, Blackman and Ritchie (2008) argue that some leaders need to emerge from among the different stakeholders working in the destination or with other organisations. A destination marketing organisation (DMO) can be defined as the entity responsible for marketing an identifiable destination (Wang, 2011). The communication addressed by DMOs to destination stakeholders plays a central role in attracting attention and resources for sustainable destination development and disseminating the efforts made to become a sustainable territory (d’Angella & de Carlo, 2016). Among the four levels of stakeholder involvement in the destination management proposed by Morgan et al. (2012), the degree of involvement strongly depends on primary stakeholders, who are seen as key decision-makers in the branding process. These primary stakeholders include DMOs together with other governmental agents (Rivera García & Pastor Ruiz, in press). It is imperative that DMOs use legislative and management tools during the planning and marketing of destinations to ensure that the benefits of tourism activity are shared equitably among all stakeholders and that sustainable practices safeguard the regeneration of resources used for tourism production (Buhalis et al., 1995). Despite the unquestioned relevance of DMOs as major agents for the promotion of tourism in destinations, current evidence from the academic literature discussing their importance in the application of sustainable tourism models is scarce. Nonetheless, changes in the governance and financing of DMOs offer opportunities for introducing new models that go beyond traditional management and marketing (Naumov et al., 2020). Hence, a study is being carried out with the overall purpose of testing the hypothesis of whether a foreseeable increase in the demand for sustainable tourism products after the current crisis would in turn impact DMOs regular activity. This research note tries to provide the first evidence arising from that study.

The specific objectives include the analysis of whether such impact would be similar throughout the different regions of the world and the establishment of different profiles of the organisations in order to analyse their perception of sustainable tourism and the extent to which they are willing to invest in this field in the future. An additional objective is to test whether DMOs would consider this situation as a turning point in this field and whether they would internally set themselves up as leaders in communicating this type of product or reach the different stakeholders of the destination and the market.

In a first phase, the data was obtained from the 10th of August to the 15th of September 2020, through an

online survey sent by email to national, regional and local DMOs of 50 European countries: 43 with their entire territory in Europe and 7 Eurasian. In a second phase, the survey is being extended to other countries in order to contrast continent-wide benchmarks.

Results

Based on the sample obtained (417 records) and considering the population size of 2073 DMOs to which the survey was sent, the margin of error (MOE) was 3,43 % with a 95 % confidence interval (z-score 1,96).

The representativeness level of each geographic area is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey Representativeness

EU REGION	Sample Size	Population Size	Sample Proportion
CENTRAL	65	289	22,49%
EAST	47	106	44,34%
NORTH	62	259	23,94%
SOUTH	173	1323	13,08%
WEST	70	96	72,92%
Total	417	2073	20,12%

Source: Authors

Table 2 classifies the DMOs profile by geographical area, office type and organisational model:

Table 2. Survey Respondent Profile

		n=417	%
Area	Central Europe	65	15,60%
	Eastern Europe	47	11,30%
	Northern Europe	62	14,90%
	Southern Europe	173	41,50%
	Western Europe	70	16,80%
Office type	NTOs	16	3,80%
	RTOs	90	21,60%
	LTOs	311	74,60%
Org. Model	Public property	328	78,70%
	Private property	16	3,80%
	Mix Publ. & Private	73	17,50%

Source: Authors



The respondents' opinion regarding tourism sustainability in their destination after the Covid-19 pandemic was measured. 86,3 % of the respondents assigned a positive rating (from 6 to 10) to the idea that sustainability matters to DMOs as sale marketing, and an even higher proportion (92,1 %) assigned a positive rating to the vision that there exists a potential demand for sustainable tourism products that must be satisfied specially after the Covid-19 pandemic.

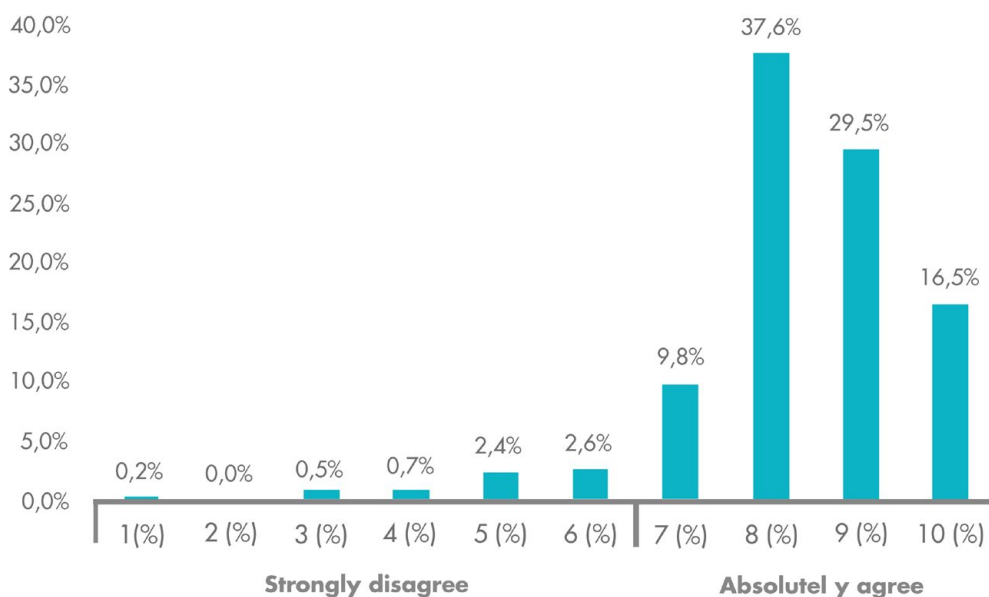
Table 3. Self-Definition Rating Regarding Tourism Sustainability in the Destination

	It hardly define us				It define us perfectly					
	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	6 (%)	7 (%)	8 (%)	9 (%)	10 (%)
Sustainability matter to us as sales marketing	0,70%	2,20%	1,90%	2,40%	6,50%	7,00%	11,80%	31,40%	30,90%	5,30%
There is a potential demand for ST products that must be covered	0,20%	1,20%	1,00%	2,40%	3,10%	8,60%	11,50%	34,10%	31,90%	6,00%
Tourism can't be understood without sustainability in our destination	0,20%	0,50%	2,20%	2,40%	4,60%	5,00%	10,10%	33,30%	31,40%	10,30%

Source: Authors

When asked about whether they considered that sustainable tourism contributes to boosting the local economy, practically all of the respondents (96,2%) agreed with this statement (Figure 1).

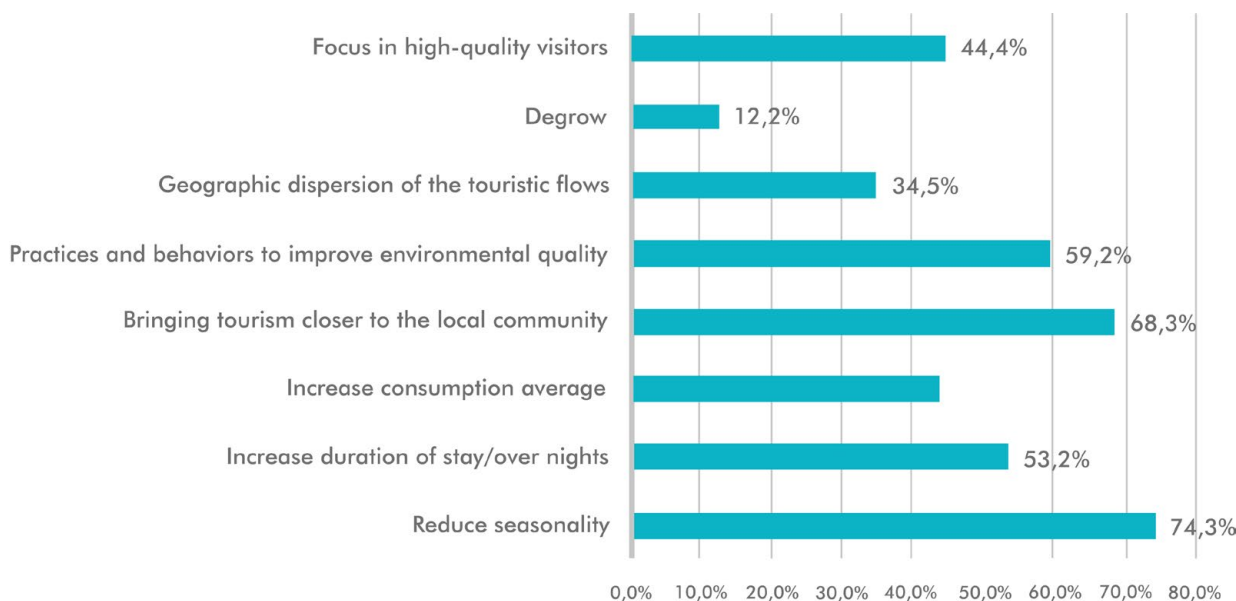
Figure 1: ST Contribution to the Local Economy



Source: Authors

Figure 2 shows that the most common strategies of DMOs to increase sustainability upon post-pandemic resumption of tourism include reducing seasonality (74,3%), bringing tourism closer to the local community (68,3%) and developing practices and behaviours to improve environmental quality (59,2%). However, degrowing is not yet in their agenda as a priority.

Figure 2: Common Goals for Sustainable Tourism



Source: Authors

Discussion

The general purpose of the study is to verify whether DMOs, in view of the foreseeable increase in the demand for sustainable tourism products upon the post-pandemic resumption of tourism, consider the current situation as a turning point, and whether and how they will become leaders in communicating this type of product.

The primary results obtained show that, even before the crisis began, European DMOs were increasingly focused on tourism sustainability, which was beginning to occupy a privileged position in their strategy. It has been observed that ethical and environmental criteria have become key factors in DMOs marketing decisions as these understand that there is a real and growing demand for this type of product in the market. Accordingly, DMOs deem the current crisis as a turning point in which sustainable tourism is perceived by the market as the one that best meets hygiene and health guarantees (Covid-free) and values such as love of nature and rural life have been reinforced.

As far as sustainable marketing is concerned, it is clear that the crisis communication strategy of DMOs is currently focused on end consumers and not only at an internal organisational level, as discussed above. DMOs

ensure a greater investment in social media than in other media such as the press, radio or TV. Furthermore, DMOs clearly target those markets where they confirm the existence of a real demand for sustainable tourism products. Upon research it was observed that this type of product is perceived as lost in the usual tourism distribution channels and does not clearly reach the potential end customer, which is one aspect that needs to be addressed.

Therefore, DMOs, from their individual position as one of the main destination stakeholders, should take advantage of the current crisis to promote less standardized and non-mass products in order to reconcile tourism development with the principles of sustainability.

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