

Opportunities for Digitalization in Marketing Management of Health Tourism in Bulgaria

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With the development of the tourism industry worldwide, there is a need for proper and sustainable management of the specialized types of tourism and one of the most developed one is health tourism. According to the tourist zoning in Bulgaria, seven regions with basic and extended specialization in the field of health tourism can be distinguished. Embracing digitalisation throughout the tourism industry will help to develop the health tourism business in a post-COVID-19 era. This will include analysis of the opportunities digitalisation opens up for marketing, product and tourism destination management. According to the Ministry of Tourism in Bulgaria digitalization is not just a change but a mandatory transformation for the tourism in Bulgaria to be efficient and competitive. In this paper, the authors strive to disclose opportunities for digitalization of marketing management on national level as well as in specific tourism regions in Bulgaria. In the article good international practices of digitalisation in the health tourism field are analysed and specific measures for the external marketing of the destination are proposed to implement in the marketing management of the health tourism in Bulgaria.

Keywords: digitalization, marketing management, tourism regions, health tourism

Introduction

The topic of the paper is dictated by the growing importance and perspective of digitization in all sectors of the economy in recent years. The increase and diversification of tourists' needs, on the other hand, lead to the need for a more detailed study of the possibilities for digitalization of the marketing management of specialized forms of tourism (health tourism, in particular). The importance of the topic is related to the possibility and need for specialization and advanced marketing management by the interested parties in the field of health tourism and the possibilities of using digital solutions in the tourism industry. In the policy for the development of tourist areas in Bulgaria, in seven, out of a total of nine separate tourist areas, nomenclatural elements are laid down regarding the priorities for the development of health tourism, which is a prerequisite for their specialization, as well as for branding Bulgaria as a destination for health tourism.

The object of this study is the marketing management of health tourism in Bulgaria, subject is the digitalization as a global phenomenon and the opportunities it provides for the creation of an effective marketing plan for the development of destinations for health tourism. The main purpose of the paperwork is to achieve,

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through digital solutions in marketing management, improvement of health tourism in the tourism regions with main and extended specialization in health tourism in Bulgaria.

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions can be raised:

1. Can digital marketing replace the traditional marketing in health tourism management?
2. What is the role of the digitalisation in tourism industry?
3. How the digitalization can be implemented in the health tourism industry?
4. What are the possibilities of digitalization of the marketing management of health tourism?

Literature Review

The present study focuses on the digitalization as a tool used in the marketing management, but it should be noted that in the process of its creation the essence and characteristics of marketing in tourism, marketing and health tourism are considered. The review of the literature on those subjects shows the existence of a wide variety of different scientific research.

Regarding marketing in tourism, the publications of Vanhove (2018), Victor et al. (2009), Kotler et al. (2017) and Tsonev (2017) are analysed.

Travel and tourism marketing differs from the other forms of consumer marketing practices. By applying marketing principles in the management of the travel and tourism industry, businesses can provide quality products and avoid developing unnecessary or unsustainable products. Tourism products can be “ideas”, “services” and “goods”, with the tourism industry mainly offering services.

Organizational marketing management is the process of analyzing, planning, implementing, and controlling to execute programs aimed at creating, maintaining and expanding mutually beneficial relationships with target markets to realize the organization’s objectives. Marketing management has its own logic that develops in several stages.

The first stage is the analysis of the marketing environment and the gathering of marketing information about it. The organization must assess the marketing environment, the market of intermediate buyers (other organizations) and the market of end buyers (citizens, families, households), assess the common and different in their consumer behavior, identify its key competitors and their behavior, create a system of permanent marketing information.

The second stage is the creation of a marketing action program. This stage is the most creative, it is the core of the management. Here the organization must segment the market and select a target market, ascertain the positioning of its goods, create competitive advantages, and develop a competitive strategy, develop and coordinate the elements of its marketing policy. At this stage, a complete marketing program is formed to reach the consumer, using a combination of minimum four elements (referred to as the 4 Ps), which is called marketing mix.

The tourism industry covers a wide range of activities and types of organizations. The range of activities and constant demand creates certain difficulties in managing tourism enterprises, namely (according to Vanhove (2018)):

- Sales volatility: tourism is a sector that is heavily influenced by the growth and drop in the economy, as well as the different levels of demand throughout the year.
- High product perishability: Unrealized sales of most tourism products and services are losses, therefore tourism products are considered perishable.
- High fixed costs: The need for administrative and operational staff and constraints imposed by the specific nature of the investment creates a fixed structure with insufficient flexibility.
- Labor-intensive activities: Tourism is an activity involving interaction between people.
- Low return on investment (ROI): Tourism is a sector with a low return on capital invested and a high capital intensity.

The marketing of tourism businesses and destinations is a key aspect of their performance and sustainability. The marketing function of the tourism enterprises is hampered by constraints such as: scarce cash flow, lack of marketing expertise, size of the business, clientele related, tactical and strategic issues. Businesses consider the marketing function peripheral to their requirements, mainly relating to sales and promotions provided. This perception has evolved from the ability of enterprises to make sales without undertaking marketing activities.

The major changes in the tourism marketing since 2000 reflect a more sophisticated development and different demand, where customers are more likely to make purchasing decisions through interaction with suppliers on the internet. Undoubtedly, significant changes have been introduced to the operation of tourism businesses, irrespective of the company size, in terms of marketing via the Internet, thus fundamentally changing the traditional marketing mix typical of the 1990s (Victor et al. 2009).

Kotler et al. (2017) and Tsonev (2017) are analysing in their research and publications the marketing mix and its application in the tourism industry and in the digital world. The 4P in the traditional marketing are no longer enough and needs to be amended and upgraded to 7P (adding People, Physical evidence and Process) and 4C (Co-creation, Current Currency, Community Activation and Conversation))

Marketing mix is a standard tool to help companies plan their offerings and the way they present them to consumers. Marketing has 4 defining aspects called the “four P’s” – derived from the name of the English terms - respectively: product, price, promotion and point of sale. The proposed product/service is usually developed on the basis of consumers’ needs and desires identified through market research. With some adjustments, these elements are also applicable in tourism marketing. In the service industry, there are other non-permanent factors that a company can use to influence the demand for services. These include service

workers and customers. Thus, the four factors included in the marketing mix of commodity marketing should be expanded to seven for the service industry by including 3 more elements: *people* – employees and clients; *physical evidence* – buildings, uniforms, etc. and *process* – actually feasible procedures and actions for the provision of services. The detailed marketing mix in tourism is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Marketing Mix in Tourism

<p>Product policy</p> <p>Price policy</p> <p>Distribution policy</p>	<p>Type of tourism product and service Level of service After-sales service Guarantees</p> <p>Rental, letting or sale Discounts Payment terms Process flexibility Value perceived by the user</p> <p>Location Accessibility Distribution channels Structure of distribution channels Sales by sales agents Sales from service providers</p>
<p>Communication policy</p> <p>Participants' policy</p> <p>Physical evidence policy</p> <p>Process policy</p>	<p>Public Relations Advertising Sales agent incentives and incentives for customers Personal selling Customer relationships</p> <p>Company culture and ethics Interpersonal behavior in the company Interpersonal behavior with customers Employee duties and freedom of action Frequency and intensity of contact with customers Duration of contacts with consumers Appearance and dress code of the associates</p> <p>External attractiveness of the location Internal attractiveness and interior Equipment</p> <p>Marketing survey of consumers' needs Consumer involvement Demand control Quality control Buyer input Service methodologies and procedures Logic, technology and sequence of actions</p>

Source: Authors' systematization.

According to Kotler et al. (2017), in a digital and communications-connected world, the marketing mix has evolved to define more active consumer participation, and it has been recommended that the four P-s should be revised as the four Cs: Co-creation, Current Currency, Community Activation and Conversation, respectively:

co-creation, current currency, community activation and conversation). Co-creation relates to the influence of users on product design, especially in product/service customization, giving rise to a better value proposition. Currently, taking advantage of the wide-ranging information system, enterprises define different price propositions for different consumers based on past purchase patterns (store location, consumer profile, etc.).

In the field of the digital economy, value is equivalent to a currency, changing accordingly to the needs of the market. With the widespread digitalization taking place in all areas of the economy and the growing internet consumption, a new specialized term in theory and practice has quite logically been introduced, namely – digital marketing.

Regarding digitalization, publications of Zlatanova (2020), Frankenfield (2021), Sustain-T (2007) are used. Regarding health tourism, the publications observed are of Padilla-Meléndez and Del Aguila-Obra (2016), Robert et al. (2013), Smith and Puczko (2014) and Basmadzhieva (2020).

The use of digital media channels such as search engines, online advertising and partnership marketing give a competitive advantage, improving understanding of customer needs, making products more affordable, expanding distribution channels and increasing sales with the help of marketing campaigns. Internet marketing consists of marketing tools and online techniques with the most popular and accessible being: websites, online ads, banners, emails, blogs, channels, commercials and social networking.

Internet marketing also includes SEO (Search Engine Optimization) or website optimization. According to Zlatanova (2020), this is a digital marketing method that deals with the positioning of websites in search engines according to certain keywords or phrases that relate to the content of a website. The goal of SEO is to increase traffic to the website. Statistics show that 90% of the users of websites are reached through a search engine.

Network marketing (affiliate marketing) is also an important method of internet marketing, where a company pays a commission to each user due to which new customers are brought in who have purchased a product or service from them (Frankenfield 2021).

With the advent of the digital age, we are witnessing a new profile of consumers manifesting globally that is set to become the majority in the near future – a middle class of urban youth, with greater mobility and connectivity. According to Sustain-T (2007), the main user groups are called YWN (Youth, Women, Citizen (Netizen) - Internet Citizen). Young people are the first to adopt the proposed new products and technologies and the trends followed by the society. As information collectors and holistic buyers, women are characterized as effective heads of the family, guiding with their opinions the financial managers in charge of purchases and assets. Internet citizens are social connectors as they connect, converse and communicate effectively with their peers. They perform the function of prescribing and contributing content online. Together, these groups represent the key to innovative marketing strategies in sustainable tourism.

About marketing management can be noted the papers of Presenza (2005), Arbogast et al. (2007), Basmadzhieva (2020), Kotler et al. (2019) and Tsonev (2015).

In the conducted empirical study are examined the issues, related to the features of the marketing management of health tourism, the product policy in the field of health tourism at macro level in Bulgaria and the application of marketing management in the field of health tourism in the country.

For the purpose of the current paper, we use the following definition of marketing management adopted by the American Marketing Association: “Marketing management is the process of planning and implementing policies of pricing, promoting and distributing ideas, products and services aimed at making exchanges that satisfy both individuals and organizations.”

These processes and activities are at the basis of the activities of macro-level tourism management bodies, such as the Ministry of Tourism, Tourism Boards, Tourism Agencies, etc. In this regard, marketing management is also applied by the Ministry of Tourism in order to create both a tourism development policy, of which its strategic marketing plan is a part, and also, in particular, the development of various priority types of tourism, including health tourism, which is the subject of study in this thesis.

Marketing management is considered in three areas:

- Activity management – assumes that the organization is seen as an open system and decision making takes into account both the internal capabilities of the organization and the requirements of the external environment, that is, the organization is oriented towards the market and is ready to constantly meet its requirements.
- Functional management – formed as a result of changes in the views of the governing bodies (Ministry of Tourism, Destination Marketing Organisations, etc.), which are based on the principle of “production needs to market needs”. Marketing is involved in deciding production issues (related to the creation of tourism products and services), stimulating the introduction of innovative ideas and technologies, ensuring the supply of a competitive product. Together with finance, marketing ensures optimal allocation of the organisation's resources to obtain the desired profit. Marketing also solves issues related to the modern distribution of the product in order to satisfy needs and obtain profit.
- Demand management – it is provided through strategic and operational decisions for specific target market segments, formed on the basis of the use of complex of tools: product, price, distribution and promotion.

Marketing management is a set of principles, methods, means and forms for managing the process of demand formation. The marketing management process consists of the following stages:

- market opportunity analysis through marketing research;

- segmentation, target market selection and positioning;
- development of the marketing mix;
- implementation of marketing activities.

The management impacts concerning the properties correspond to the development of tourism destinations in a certain type of specialised tourism, in particular health tourism, as well as to the development processes in the identified type of tourism. In this regard, it is necessary to address the two destination management models popular in theory and practice, whose approaches to be applied selectively in the creation of the current model for digital management of health tourism in Bulgaria. There are two destination management models which are based on two concepts – the descriptive and the conceptual model. The authors who created the conceptual and descriptive models are respectively Presenza and Arbogast, Deng, and Maumbe.

According to the conceptual model, the roles of destination marketing organizations and their activities can be organized into two main functions:

- External destination marketing – The main operational or tactical marketing activities of the destination marketing organizations (DMOs) are described in the Destination Marketing Wheel (see Figure 1). These operational marketing activities are put in place after the basic strategic marketing activities, such as image definition, branding and positioning, have been completed. Operationally, the external destination marketing function should aim to attract visitors to the destination. Specific activities aim to influence the actions of people outside the destination.

Figure 1. Destination Marketing Wheel



Source: Presenza (2005).

Web marketing is shown as the largest component in the Destination Marketing Wheel because of its growing importance as an effective and efficient way to send marketing and other messages to stakeholders.

- Internal development of the destinations – According to Arbogast (2007), it can be viewed as various forms of activities (other than marketing) that are undertaken by destination marketing organizations to develop and sustain tourism in the destination. The destination development function is internal, i.e., its activities are directed towards initiatives within the destination itself. Many of the activities require actions and resources from other stakeholders in the destination.

Regarding health tourism, publications of Smith and Puczko (2014), Tsonev and Basmadzhieva (2017) and all relevant regulations in Bulgaria are analysed like: Concept for Tourism Regions of Bulgaria (2015) and the Tourism Law (2013).

In the specialized literature there are several authors whose scientific paper works are specialized in the field of health tourism and there are many classifications and terms. From these, we can summarise that health tourism is a specialised type of tourism in which normal tourism activities are associated with an active intention of improving people's health. The general term is health tourism, although medical tourism, spa tourism or balneo tourism are often used as synonyms, which is wrong and could lead to confusion in theory and practice. All the terms that are used as synonyms are in fact subdivisions of health tourism. (Smith and Puczko 2014).

According to Tsonev and Basmadzhieva (2017) the terms “recreational” or “medical” tourism, including fitness and wellness, echo relatively new trends in health tourism. The main idea of this innovative trend is the improvement of the client's (tourist's) physical condition and health, which is not necessarily linked to the application of natural healing resources.

In Bulgaria, according to the Tourism Law (2013) there are several conditions for practicing different types of specialized tourism, besides the traditional mass (Black Sea and winter), which includes health, spa, wellness, camping, rural, cultural, adventure, eco, wine, gourmet, event, hunting, congress tourism. In contemporary tourism theory and practice, there is also talk of destinations for entertainment and experiences.

Bulgaria is also a popular destination for health tourism and prevention. Our country has rich traditions in the field for several reasons, and the presence of mineral springs proven to be beneficial for health is among the most popular areas of health tourism in our country. Many balneo resorts across the country offer a variety of specialised professional services. Bulgaria is among the countries that combine low prices of medical services with professional expertise of medical staff and can become a preferred destination for so-called health tourists. In the context of specialised types of tourism, and in particular health tourism, it is necessary to identify the relevant places offering these subtypes of tourism. These places are also subject to marketing management linked to the internal capabilities of destination marketing organisations.

It is important to clarify that there are three normative documents in Bulgaria that affect the issues related to the types of health tourism, namely the Tourism Act, which corresponds directly with the Ordinance on the conditions and procedures for the certification of the various health tourism centres (2 and 04-14), as well as the Concept of Tourism Regions in Bulgaria. Given the ubiquitous digitisation of many services, and given that the Internet is all around us, it is no surprise that they are all available online on the website of the Ministry of Tourism, and in the National Tourism Register,¹ which is also electronic, there is a subdivision entitled “Balneotherapy (medical spa), spa, wellness and thalassotherapy centres”. The Concept of Tourism Regions in Bulgaria (2015) concerns tourism products and their specialisation by tourism regions, while the Ordinance is concerned with specific establishments, their equipment, and the specific activities to be carried out in them. There are certain problems and inconsistencies, which we have addressed in the current study. It is no coincidence that the thalassotherapy centres in the left figure, which are not present in the Concept, and medical tourism in the right figure, which is not addressed in the Tourism Act and Ordinance, are coloured differently.

Health tourism means taking care of the body and soul through treatments that make people feel good – massages, herbal treatment and exfoliation, workouts, water baths, diets. Health tourism also includes diagnostic tests to identify possible health problems, rehabilitation courses including physical and psychological counselling, as well as programmes to relieve stress, change diet, reduce injuries due to physical exertion and even improve sex life. Health tourism is a general term encompassing types of tourism related to prevention, treatment or rehabilitation.

The Tourism Act (2013) gives the following definitions for the above centres:

- “Balneo (medical spa)” is a centre, either independent or part of an accommodation place, located in an urban or resort environment, where therapeutic procedures based on natural healing factors (mineral water and/or healing mud) are applied. The centre is a medical institution within the meaning of the Medical Institutions Act.
- “Spa centre” means a centre, whether independent or part of an accommodation property, located in an urban environment or in a resort, in which a variety of procedures, programs and rituals are offered, involving the use of water – mineral, spring and other water permitted by law, and/or healing mud and/or sea water and/or other natural factors, by applying classical and non-traditional methods of influence aimed at anti-stress, relaxation and psycho-physical recovery, as well as aimed at the beauty of the human body.
- A “wellness centre” is a centre, either stand-alone or part of an accommodation property, located in an urban environment or a resort, which offers a variety of recreational and beauty treatments, programs and anti-stress rituals, as well as holistic approaches to achieve the

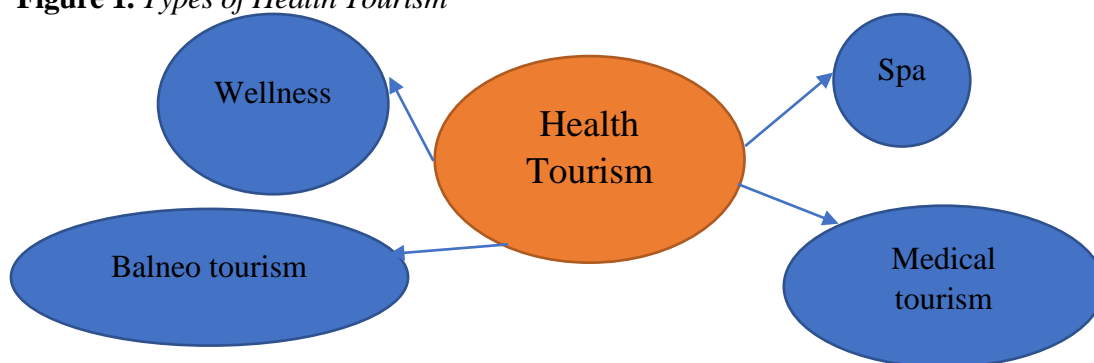
¹<https://www.tourism.government.bg/en/pages/national-tourism-register>. [Accessed 1 February 2022]

physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, professional and social well-being of the individual. The use of water and natural factors in the center is optional.

- A “thalassotherapy centre” is a centre, either stand-alone or part of an accommodation property, located in an urban environment or a resort, close to the seashore, which offers programs and rituals involving the use of sea water and/or naturally derived products, and/or liman mud, through classical and non-traditional therapeutic methods of influence aimed at restoring psycho-emotional and physical health, as well as aimed at the beauty of the human body, which are offered in a specially equipped rooms, halls and premises. The therapeutic activity is supervised by a doctor with a specialty in physical and rehabilitation medicine.

Figure 2 presents different types of health tourism, which could be found in the territory and tourism practice in Bulgaria.

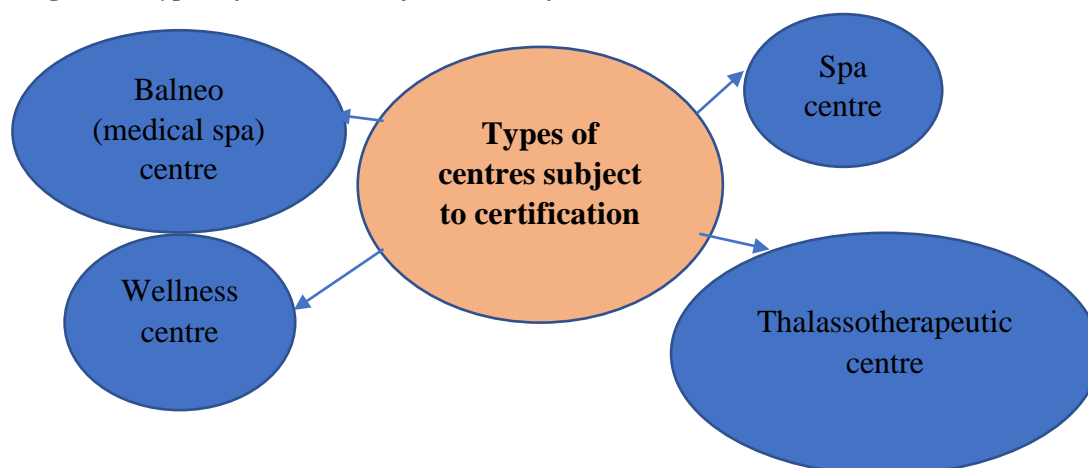
Figure 1. *Types of Health Tourism*



Source: Author’s systematization of the Bulgarian legislation.

From the figure we can summarize that among the most common types of health tourism, which are also found in the Bulgarian regulations are spa, wellness, balneological and medical tourism.

In addition to the Tourism Act, which aims to create conditions for the development of specialized types of tourism – cultural, health, spa and wellness, rural, eco, congress, children and youth, adventure, sports, hunting, golf and other tourism on 29 January 2016 was created Ordinance on the conditions and procedure for certification of a “balneo (medical) centre”, “spa centre”, “wellness centre” and “thalassotherapeutic centre” and then repealed on the basis of Article 138, paragraph 3 and 4 of the Tourism Act and was issued an Ordinance No 04-14 of 9 October 2019 on the conditions and procedure for the certification of a “balneo (medical spa) centre”, “spa centre”, “wellness centre” and “thalassotherapeutic centre”, according to which the types of centres subject to certification determined according to the services they provide (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Types of Centres Subject to Certification*

Source: Author's systematization according to Ordinance № 04-14.

The products offered in this type of tourism activity are not mass and unified. There is a possibility to individualize them according to the needs of each tourist.

Methodology/Materials and Methods

The methodological framework is based on the systematic and holistic approach and more specifically includes:

- Induction and deduction
- Observation.
- Analysis and synthesis – of the current situation in the health tourism in Bulgaria.
- Analogy and comparative analysis – in the discussion of the good practices.
- Statistical and descriptive methods – in the empirical research.
- Survey research.

Results

The author has developed a system of indicators for a complex evaluation of the marketing management of health tourism. Based on the obtained empirical results, are derived recommendations for the development of health tourism in the country through the implementation of digitalization and innovation in marketing management. In the current paper the authors answered to the research questions, stated in the introduction, and we can point out the following results:

1. The digital marketing cannot replace the traditional marketing – they need to be used in parallel. In the current research the main areas in which

digital marketing has transformed tourism marketing management are explained and analysed.

2. Digitalisation is driving innovation, growth and globalisation and is completely changing perceptions of travel itself. The authors described the basic principle that any digital and social media plan at micro-, macro- and meso-levels, part of marketing management, should follow.
3. In the paper good practices are analysed to find ways how digitalization can be implemented in health tourism in practice, to bring added value to the industry. These good practices can be used as example an idea for a future model for marketing management of health tourism in Bulgaria.
4. The opportunities for digitalization of marketing management of health tourism in Bulgaria are analyzed and certain recommendations are provided. For this purpose, a methodological framework based on 9 criteria and 33 indicators for research and evaluation of marketing management of health tourism is created. Based on the survey results and determining the coefficient of significance of each criterion, a comprehensive assessment of the marketing management of health tourism at the macro level in Bulgaria was made according to marketing specialists and expert. The specific measures proposed are grouped into 5 categories, namely health tourism in its entirety; medical tourism; spa and wellness tourism; thalassotherapy and spa tourism; external marketing of Bulgaria and in particular Sofia Region.

Discussion

Digital Marketing – Nature

It is recommended that digital marketing does not displace traditional marketing, but that the two practices coexist and complement each other's functions. Digital marketing promotes and encourages more activity and results, while traditional marketing introduces interaction with the consumer.

Connectivity is probably the most essential element of the changing marketing history. Interaction leads to a surplus of information, resulting in a greater importance of the opinions of friends and family members and a decrease in individual attention.

Collaboration is another element particularly important for the positioning and promotion of services offered by tourism enterprises as part of the marketing management in tourism, in particular health tourism. It provides an opportunity to increase the productivity and reduce the costs of these enterprises and organizations involved in the sector.

Digital marketing and the Internet as a phenomenon have largely transformed tourism marketing and tourism marketing management. This transformation is expressed in five main areas:

- Transformation of tourism market research

The most profound effect that social media has had on the travel industry to date is the democratization of online comments, ratings, reviews, and feedback left by consumers. Nowadays, tourists go online to research their future, planned-to-visit tourism destinations and accommodation properties. When booking a tour, 89% of millennials plan whistle-stop tours and vacations based on content posted by their peers online. This is done using social media networks such as Facebook and Instagram, specialist review websites such as Tripadvisor and comments and ratings left on Google Maps.

- Increasing social sharing

People have always enjoyed sharing and showing photos and videos of their travels to family and friends. What social media has done is make it easier and more empowering for people to share travel experiences with a wider audience than ever before. According to various studies, over 97% of millennials share photos and videos of their travels online, building an influential network of peer-to-peer content that serves to inspire potential guests.

This trend has not gone unnoticed. Many hotels and resorts have started social contests and campaigns to ensure they get some credit for their guests' social activity. An interesting example can be seen with the Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants chain, who are using guests' wedding photos instead of specially taken professional photos to advertise the locations designed to host wedding events. The campaign encourages guests to take photos, tag them with the hashtag #KimptonWeddings – and ultimately create user-generated content for the brand that is free, authentic and repurposed across its marketing channels, especially in their Instagram page².

- Improved customer service

Customer service and satisfaction have also changed because of social media. Most travel brands have a prominent social media presence, which is used when necessary to provide assistance to customers who contact the company with a question, need for advice or complaint. Companies that respond to complaints in a sincere and genuine manner develop strong reputations among current and potential customers. Additionally, social media can serve as a social listening tool to uncover customer information that is needed in the marketing management of the enterprise or organization. Listening to customers through social media can help any brand create an exceptional and personalized experience.

- Transforming travel agencies

Social media has also had a major impact on the travel agency model. The availability of information and the ease of self-service booking have forced travel agencies to adapt from a simple a-selling model to a more digital one. Travel agencies are not obsolete – they are still responsible for 55% of all airline bookings, 77% of cruise bookings and 73% of package bookings. But many agencies have shifted their focus from the in-person to the online experience as they adapt to new technology and market trends, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. In the last 2 years, the percentage of online bookings has increased even more given the need for social distance, and this trend is expected to be maintained.

²<https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/kimptonweddings/?hl=bg>.

- Changing loyalty programmes

As most traders know, acquiring new customers is much more expensive and difficult than retaining existing ones. Loyalty programs have become a fundamental part of the travel business model, and social media has had a huge impact on the way travel businesses build loyalty programs. Many customers understand that the opinions they share on their individual profiles and channels have a huge impact on everyone employed in the industry. As a result, these guests feel entitled to compensation for the positive word-of-mouth marketing they do for a brand. More than 25% of millennials who participate in loyalty programs are very likely to post a review, photo or comment about a brand in exchange for loyalty points.

From all of the above, we can conclude that marketing and marketing management have changed significantly over the years, with digitization having a major impact on the processes and activities. In this regard and for the purpose of this study, it is important to examine the role of digitalization and digital marketing in tourism, particularly health tourism.

Role of the Digitalization in Tourism

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the tourism industry has undergone drastic changes. Whereas travel planning used to involve visiting a travel agency office or flicking through a catalogue or guidebook and being told by a friend was the most reliable guide to what to expect and how to make your experience more satisfying, nowadays globalisation and digitalisation have helped to manage travel almost entirely online. Through the technological advancements, travellers can book a flight and hotel in seconds, get reviews on local attractions, and personalise their experience to the highest degree. The development of the so-called “sharing economy” is forcing companies to constantly redefine their definition of tourism and adapt the way they work.

Digitalisation is driving innovation, growth and globalisation and is completely changing perceptions of travel itself – today it seems more accessible and convenient than ever. Even if it does not provide a radically new concept, technology can speed up and facilitate access to a particular service, with all the structural implications this entails.

More and more people prefer to book rooms, rent cars, and pay for excursions through their smart phones and mobile applications. In addition to offering a full range of services, mobile devices are becoming something of a living companion, knowing us better than anyone else and anticipating our desires before we've even thought about what to choose. Social media and review-sharing platforms have turned travellers into full-time content creators and guides.

The ability to collect data and analyse it is perhaps the most crucial element of digitisation. By processing personal data, companies learn more about customer behaviour and optimise their services. Consumers are increasingly looking for a higher degree of personalisation, flexibility, simplified interactions, and payments. They want to be served equally seamlessly across all channels and they want full integration and coordination between mobile applications, offices, and phone bookings.

Growing travel demand, especially in emerging markets, presents an opportunity for new entrants. Digital companies are looking for stronger customer relationships, dramatically changing operations and seeking to better understand traveller preferences. Connected devices and artificial intelligence (AI) will provide efficiency gains in the industry. Technology will also impact the industry's workforce, with employees able to receive real-time information and make decisions while helping AI focus on its core strengths.

Over the next decade, four key themes are expected to be with a main significance to the digital transformation of the travel industry:

- The experience

Travellers will receive an experience tailored to their habits and preferences. Throughout the journey, companies will optimise the customer experience by collecting and sharing data and continuously generating ideas and drawing conclusions. Over time, the journey will become increasingly integrated with other daily activities.

- Industry relations

Roles in the ecosystem are becoming increasingly blurred as participants compete for the customer relationship. Platforms that facilitate collaborations across the ecosystem will continue to emerge, while information sharing will be increasingly determinant of relationships between businesses.

- Digital enterprises

Digital technologies that revolutionize manufacturing, optimize the use of real-time assets, and ultimately augment the industry's workforce will transform operations. Innovations such as 3D printing, AI, IoT, virtual reality (VR) and digital platforms will enable agile working and changes to core operational processes.

- Safety and security

A concerted effort to protect data and enhance cybersecurity for travellers will be critical to maintaining trust and public safety. Digital technologies can be leveraged to create a secure environment with broad boundaries.

Companies should take advantage of these trends quickly, or at least prepare for their impact, for two important reasons:

- The digitization of everything around us – when technology is affordable and small, there are fewer and fewer barriers to connecting devices, vehicles, people and things.
- Diverse consumer expectations – influenced by practices in other sectors, customers in the travel industry are becoming more demanding.

There is a possibility that tourists may prefer the institutional website to make a booking or subsequent purchase of tourism products and services for several key reasons, such as:

- Availability of a database of products, services, events, structures, benefits that can be updated in real time by different entities.
- The predisposition of web pages with good accessibility.
- The availability of interactive or georeferenced maps (the latter as innovative tools, which are able to represent the characteristics of a territory in terms of spatial coordinates, distances and geographical features).
- The full presence of all information on routes and, more generally, on the characteristics of the mobility possible within the scope of an area, as well as the provision of e-booking and e-commerce services.

There are several institutional websites available in Bulgaria, such as the one of the Ministry of Tourism, the Official Tourism Portal,³ as well as the various websites and social media profiles and pages of the Organisations for Management of the Tourism Regions and others. These and similar websites could host relevant information on types of tourism in Bulgaria (including health tourism), accessible to foreign tourists from key target audiences.

It is necessary that any digital and social media plan at micro-, macro- and meso-levels, part of marketing management, should follow basic principles including:

- 1) With the variety of mass media available, a principle should be established from the outset – to develop a logical and consistent use of media.
- 2) The second principle identifies the use of all available media as impractical and justifying high costs. Concentrating activity in certain media is an advantage, according to the objectives of the enterprise or institution.
- 3) The third principle recommends that the website should be the centre of the digital strategy. It should be developed as the central management and showcase of the entire company. It should present and explain the nature of the business, its positioning, the nature of the products/services offered, the aspirations and future goals of the enterprise.
- 4) The fourth principle justifies the mandatory management of all digital channels.
- 5) The need for staff to manage digital channels in a particular company represents the fifth principle.

Having examined the basic role of digitalization in tourism, it should be clarified some of the basic terminology in the field of health tourism in Bulgaria in particular and also the good practices in the field should be analysed, to identify opportunities for applying the principles of digitalization in its marketing management.

³<https://bulgariatravel.org/>. [Accessed 1 February 2022]

Health Tourism and Good Practices

Considering the specificities of the health tourism in Bulgaria, it is necessary to review the best practices in the development of health tourism worldwide to assess the opportunities for digitalization of marketing management in Bulgaria.

The first selection criterion we have chosen is according to the implemented good government policies for the development of health tourism. As an interesting example, we can point to Taiwan, whose government has successfully intervened in the development and promotion of health tourism through the internationalization of the health sector and the creation of an international health industry park connecting airports and major hospitals. Turkey's government policy, on the other hand, is linked to a programme to demolish old hospitals and replace them with medical facilities intended primarily for foreign tourists travelling for medical treatment. Digitalisation is widely used in the medical tourism, and the Turkish website My health Turkey is a case in point.⁴ This is an organization with decades of experience and knowledge in the health sector, involved and affiliated with the leading hospitals in Turkey. Through this platform, could be reached all the necessary information for a patient – a potential consumer of medical tourism.

Countries have also been selected on the principle of popular destinations for health tourism with a certain specialization, and for this purpose, it has been considered the Lonely Planet's chart top 10 destinations for health tourism, which have different specializations and from which we can draw ideas and example. Among these destinations we can highlight Israel, which specialise in medical tourism in a wide range of diseases, as well as in rehabilitation with water from the Dead Sea, and Macedonia, which specialise in dental treatment. Some countries and clinics have online systems for booking appointments, consultation (including online) and overall travel, stay and treatment arrangements.

The last criterion by which best practices are selected is according to the innovations applied in the field of health tourism. Of these, we can single out India, where the most widely sought-after by tourists and foreigners is Ayurveda alternative medicine, which is natural and holistic medicine treatments. Dubai, on the other hand, is associated with the large investments made in the construction of the innovative "all-medical zone" and numerous high-tech accommodations.

Opportunities for Digitalization of Marketing Management of Health Tourism in Bulgaria

Based on the theoretical propositions discussed so far in the current paperwork and considering the results of the empirical study, a model for marketing management of health tourism in Bulgaria can be created. The current paper will only highlight the recommendations related to the possibilities of digitalization of the marketing management of health tourism, which on future stage can be used by the Organizations for tourism region management in Bulgaria (OTRM) or the Ministry of Tourism to build a model for a specific region or a national one.

⁴<https://www.myhealthturkey.com/medical-cost-reduction-service/>.

According to the trends and forecasts considered in the “Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria” 2014-2030, prepared by the Ministry of Economy and Energy in Bulgaria, “...domestic tourism will focus on diversification of tourism products and offering thematic tourism products in the field of cultural heritage, modern culture, protected natural areas, health tourism, historical, sports, religious tourism, business and others”. Among the main priorities is to increase the share of specialised types of tourism leading to year-round and more intensive occupancy. With its vast information resource, internet enables tourists to check hotels, weather forecasts, provides information on local food and can connect tourists with others to share opinions on their chosen destination. Thus, the vast information resource available to modern tourists presents tourism entrepreneurs with a whole new set of challenges. Given the new demands of tourists, they are forced to make new and significant investments for which they expect a good rate of return. Developing and promoting specialised tourism products is seen as a means of overcoming the problem of seasonality and creating an emotional bond between foreign tourists and Bulgaria.

The methodological framework of the study of the marketing management of health tourism includes a strategic marketing plan for the development and management of health tourism in Bulgaria in the context of its specialization. In the empirical study, firstly, we created a methodological framework based on 9 criteria and 33 indicators for research and evaluation of marketing management of health tourism (see Tables 2 and 3).

Based on our study, seven out of nine tourism regions have an extended specialization in the field of health tourism and only one of them has it as a main specialization. We believe that from these 7 for more detailed analysis, specific recommendations and activities in the strategic marketing plan, we should select 1 that in its “extended specialization” section mentions health tourism in all its types, and more specifically Region Tracian Valley, Region Sofia, Region Varna and Region Burgas. It is important health tourism locations to be included in the external marketing of destination Bulgaria with videos, websites and catalogues, in order to promote them. All 7 tourism regions where health tourism is implemented have a good online presence - some of them have Facebook pages and others have specially developed websites. The website created by the Ministry of Tourism for Brand Bulgaria lists all the regions, but could also link to their websites and Facebook pages and give more information and publicity, such as this in the first recommendation we could give related to the digitalization of the marketing management of health tourism.

As digitalisation has progressed, paper surveys are becoming less common, so we conducted an online survey, using a specialist website – Kwick Surveys, among marketing professionals and other management staff, as well as tourism experts. The survey questions directly correspond to the criteria and indicators mentioned above. The aim of the analysis is to compare the judgement of those working in tourism specialised enterprises with those from the experts in the sector. The survey was prepared and distributed via email and other online communication channels – it was sent to the Ministry of Tourism, to municipalities and to business people and we received responses from all stakeholders. The

results were summarised directly on the website, then analysed and compared by criteria and indicators, which were subsequently ranked in order of importance. A key area with the potential to digitise the marketing management of health tourism are specifically the marketing research related to potential and actual health tourism consumers, health tourism sites, and industry professionals.

Based on the survey results and determining the coefficient of significance of each criterion, a comprehensive assessment of the marketing management of health tourism at the macro level in Bulgaria was made according to marketing specialists and experts:

Table 2. *Summary Indicators for Complex Assessment of the Marketing Management of Health Tourism at the Macro Level in Bulgaria According to Marketing Specialists and Managers*

Criteria	Significance factor	Absolute indicator P	Base value P _{ib}	Relative value O	Differentiated and complex assessment
External factors influencing the marketing management of health tourism in the destination	0.05	4.08	5	0.816	0.041
Legislation	0.06	2.75	5	0.55	0.033
External marketing of the destination	0.11	1.95	5	0.39	0.043
Internal factors - Infrastructure	0.07	3.16	5	0.632	0.044
Internal factors - Superstructure	0.12	3.12	5	0.624	0.075
Internal factors - Specialized superstructure	0.20	3.22	5	0.644	0.129
Image and perception of Bulgaria as a destination for health tourism	0.14	2.29	5	0.458	0.064
Internal Marketing - Human Resources	0.12	2.90	5	0.58	0.070
Specific factors influencing the marketing management of health tourism	0.13	2.59	5	0.518	0.067
Total	1	26.06	40	5.212	0.566

Source: Author's systematization.

Table 3. Summarized Indicators for Complex Assessment of the Marketing Management of Health Tourism at the Macro Level in Bulgaria According to Experts

Criteria	Significance factor	Absolute indicator P	Base value Pib	Relative value O	Differentiated and complex assessment
External factors influencing the marketing management of health tourism in the destination	0.05%	3.66	5	0.732	0.037
Legislation	0.06%	2.86	5	0.572	0.034
External marketing of the destination	0.11%	2.52	5	0.504	0.055
Internal factors - Infrastructure	0.07%	3.60	5	0.72	0.050
Internal factors - Superstructure	0.12%	3.40	5	0.68	0.082
Internal factors - Specialized superstructure	0.20%	3.53	5	0.706	0.141
Image and perception of Bulgaria as a destination for health tourism	0.14%	3.05	5	0.61	0.085
Internal Marketing - Human Resources	0.12%	3.80	5	0.76	0.091
Specific factors influencing the marketing management of health tourism	0.13%	2.87	5	0.574	0.075
Total	1	29.29	40	5.858	0.651

Source: Author's systematization.

At the end of our research, we prepared a list with recommendations with the idea of providing it to marketing managers in tourism regions and to experts in the Ministry of Tourism, in order to successfully develop and manage newly established tourism regions, in particular Sofia Region, which can be approbated by the Organization for management of the tourism region Sofia. We have described recommendations, some of which are related to the possibilities of digitalization of marketing management of health tourism.

The specific measures proposed are grouped into 5 categories, namely health tourism in its entirety; medical tourism; spa and wellness tourism; thalassotherapy and spa tourism; external marketing of Bulgaria and in particular Sofia Region.

Among the activities related to health tourism in its entirety, we can highlight respectively the creation of measures to stimulate Bulgarian tour operators to offer health tourism packages and the development of joint health tourism products between Sofia and other Balkan capitals, which could be offered digitally, with the possibility of online booking and payment. A mobile application could be also created.

In terms of the medical tourism, we pay particular attention to the creation of an international medical park, which would integrate all the known medical centres designated for Sofia Region, following the example of Taiwan, and the establishment of international partnerships with hospitals or foreign tour operators offering medical tourism packages. Similar to the Turkish My health Turkey website, an app or online portal could be created for the medical tourism in

Bulgaria – with information on the treatments, provided in Bulgaria and access to services offered by leading clinics in the country.

Regarding the spa and wellness tourism, among the most essential measures are the development, implementation and regulation of innovative methods – massages, manual therapies and treatments following the example of India. The opportunities for digitisation and automation here includes digital services in the spa and wellness hotels, also smart tourism – online check in, digital spa and wellness menu with the offered services and mobile apps for alternative wellness services - such as meditation and yoga - to complement the services offered on site.

From the fourth group of measures related to balneology and thalassotherapy we highlight the creation of a development plan and quality, sustainable and targeted management of the Central Bath in Sofia and the specialization of the spa hotels and centers for the needs of tourism and certification of services by type of treatment and type of mineral water, including digital marketing and quality and effective publicity.

The last group of measures is related to the external marketing of the destination and here the most significant are the creation of an advertising video for Sofia Region as a destination for health tourism; the creation of an online 3D catalogue of Sofia Region as a tourism destination with health orientation and the development of a digital calendar of events in the field of health tourism at the level of location and an overall calendar for Sofia Region and the preparation of a plan and forms of their publicity.

In our opinion, three main recommendations can be made related to the possibilities of digitalization of the marketing management of health tourism, which are relevant for each of the nine regions, as their implementation would lead to greater efficiency in their development and respectively in the tourism industry of Bulgaria:

- Improving the presentation of information and tourism opportunities of the regions in terms of the offered products and services on the electronic sites and social networks. In today's environment of widespread digitalization, such approach can be very effective and successful for the tourism business. On the other hand, information provision and systematization of the offered tourism products and services and their full promotion would contribute to the formation of the final tourism product by tour operators according to specific tourism needs.
- Creation and maintenance of an up-to-date database of tourists visiting each tourist attraction in the area, especially with regard to the natural ones. The second recommendation focuses on the marketing management of the area, as its implementation will enable the analysis of preferences of the actual users. The results of such information provision would be conducive to the creation of product development strategies, both for the area in terms of public policy and for business in the regards to the tour operators.
- Implementation of innovative approaches in presenting and promoting the

tourism opportunities of the region, through different formats and possibilities of videos, interactive approaches to present images and information, etc.

Conclusion

From the point of view of Bulgaria's macro-level management and considering the identification of health tourism specialization according to which 7, out of 9 regions, have a main or extended specialization in the field of health tourism, we conclude that Bulgaria could be branded at the macro-level as a destination for health tourism all year round.

We believe that a comprehensive marketing management and positioning strategy for the newly created 9 tourism regions needs to be developed as there is currently no such strategy. There is a need for more effective presentation of the available tourism resources in order to attract visitor's interest, through participation in tourism forums/exhibitions and conferences, paid advertising on tourism platforms, etc. Such a positioning strategy could be targeted at specific sites or at specialised types of tourism products related to the consumption of the various services offered in the area.

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