



The Impact of Digital Marketing on Health Tourism in the Western Balkans during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *Health tourism is the fastest growing healthcare industry worldwide and it refers to patients traveling to other developed or developing countries to improve or renew individual medical interventions. The growth of health tourism can also be seen as a chance for innovation and growth in developing countries. With this type of tourism as an export-growing strategy, many socio-economic problems can be solved that developing countries with traditional industries are faced. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the current views on the ways of doing business, as well as on tourism, which is becoming the industry that has suffered the most damage. In that sense, regional cooperation could be of saving importance for the tourism of Western Balkans countries after the pandemic of the Covid-19 and especially health tourism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Healthcare is one of the most sensitive and responsible activities of human society, with a dominant social function which implies that any significant change in this area has broader implications for society as a whole (Petković & Lukić, 2013, p. 446). As a result, health tourism is gaining in importance. Health tourism is the fastest growing branch of tourism in the world, with an annual growth of 15 to 20 percent. The World Health Organization predicts that by 2030, health care will become the strongest industry in the world and one of the biggest drivers of tourist travel (WHO, 2021).

In the past, health tourism meant the border area of medicine and tourism, in which tourist and health institutions dealt with an organized stay of tourists in spas and climatic health resorts in order to prevent diseases, rehabilitation and treatment with the help of natural factors (Butler & Szromek, 2019). Today, health tourism can be viewed from different perspectives, but one of the most common is that *health tourism is a very complex tourism product that includes a large number of specialized facilities and services on trips motivated by the need to improve health and people's quality of life* (Institute of Tourism, 2019). Therefore, health tourism can be divided into three forms: spa tourism, medical and wellness tourism.

Spa tourism involves people traveling to spas or climatic health resorts for treatment, rehabilitation and prevention with the help of natural healing factors and modern medical procedures (Moreno-González, León, & Fernández-Hernández, 2020).

Medical tourism refers to people travelling abroad for treatment and complex medical interventions (Pessot et al., 2021). This type of tourism includes dental tourism.

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Wellness tourism is travel associated with maintaining or enhancing one's wellbeing with the use of healing and relaxing properties of nature and other activities (relaxation, meditation, yoga, recreation, beauty care, healthy eating, etc.) (Rydback, 2021).

In the current 'age of the global Covid-19 pandemic, there are serious doubts about whether health tourism will have a bright future and survive even in times of crisis, or is it necessary to include more strategic digital marketing tools in order to continue to develop in a positive direction? This issue is of particular importance for the Western Balkans countries, where health tourism and its subtype, wellness tourism, are recent concepts whose development in some countries is still being actively worked on.

2. HEALTH TOURISM AND DIGITAL MARKETING

The promotion of services provided for the development of health tourism in international markets is extremely important. Successful implementation of health tourism relies on informing the potential patient about processes, procedures, alternatives, treatment services, tourism opportunities, travel organizations and target countries (Tengilimoğlu et al., 2018).

Websites are extremely important for healthcare institutions that are focused on international target markets in terms of reaching potential customers in the target market. For a healthcare institution that provides services of any type of health tourism, a website is the center of its digital world and is perhaps the most important part of the overall digital marketing strategy. A website is a whole series of documents that convey information through custom texts, images, animations, videos and applications and provides various services such as e-commerce, socialization, maps, news, blogs, and banking, including all interconnected pages (Szromek & Naramski, 2019).

Digital platforms are important communication channels for companies and are a mirror of all organizations, including those that promote health tourism. These platforms allow customers to contact the company and get information. At the end of this interaction, the experience between the company and the user can positively or negatively affect the image of the entire service in the minds of customers. As far as health tourism is concerned, these platforms are very cheap platforms with no time and location restrictions and provide many channels to reach potential customers in different regions of the world. Also, digital platforms are one of the easiest ways to interact with clients looking for complete and additional information (Szromek & Naramski, 2019).

In recent years, social networks have taken precedence in the way of promoting all types of tourism. (Chavez et al., 2020). This is due to modern trends in the tourism market. In addition to standard travel motives, modern tourists are increasingly interested in how to, broadly speaking, escape from a stressful life and dedicate themselves to their own health and well-being. This provides the opportunity for all types of health tourism development (Milenković et al., 2019). Also, modern tourists are increasingly seeking confirmation from other visitors about the choice of the desired destination; social networks and forums are a key factor.

Employees are also of great importance for the marketing activities of health institutions. *The hired employees give their maximum, invest additional effort and effort to perform the assigned work tasks, are ready to persevere in difficult situations and circumstances and act as brand ambassadors* (Lukić Nikolić, 2021). However, in the age of the Covid-19 pandemic, when health workers are busy saving lives, it is difficult to count on their engagement in health tourism promotion.

3. PROMOTION OF HEALTH TOURISM THROUGH DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES – CASE STUDY OF VRNJAČKA BANJA AND “DR SIMO MILOŠEVIĆ” INSTITUTE IN IGALO

Natural resources are a necessary condition for improving health and creating an image of a health and wellness tourism destination (Moreno-González, León, & Fernández-Hernández, 2020). In this sense, countries of the Western Balkans have a great advantage over other regions, as they have different natural resources, favorable climatic conditions and interesting destinations that can attract wellness tourists.

The Republic of Serbia has very favorable opportunities for the development of health tourism. This is reflected in the favorable conditions of preserved nature, clean air, unpolluted rivers and lakes, mild climate, and rich flora and fauna. Although spa tourism is extremely developed, other subtypes of health tourism are still in their infancy. This especially refers to wellness tourism. Although many centers in our country deal with this branch of tourism, they are not sufficiently represented in marketing, especially in the field of forming a unique tourist offer.

Vrnjačka Banja is the most famous and most visited spa in the Republic of Serbia and is the second in the number of visits as a tourist site in our area. The development of its tourism is based on factors such as extremely favorable geographical position, climatic features, healing thermo-mineral springs, a natural and ecologically preserved environment, flora and fauna, rich cultural heritage, organized events and similar facilities that increase the quality of leisure time (Dimitrovski et. al, 2019). The following table provides an overview of the number of visits and overnight stays of tourists before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Tourist arrivals and stays in Vrnjačka Banja (month: February)
– before the start of the Covid-19 virus pandemic

Region Vrnjačka Banja	Overnight stay of tourists			Arrival of tourists		
	In total	domestic	foreign	In total	domestic	foreign
2020.	31975	28346	3629	11403	9923	1480
2019.	22094	20064	2030	6766	6061	705
2018.	18657	16662	1995	6296	5672	624

Source: Republican Bureau of Statistics 2018, 2019, 2020

The number of total recorded tourist arrivals in February 2021 is 9316, 8511 domestic and only 805 foreign guests. A total of 25661 overnight stays were realized, of which domestic guests made up the majority - 23501 guests, and 2160 foreign tourists spent the night (RBS, 2021). A drastic drop in guests during the pandemic is noticeable, as of yet unrecorded in the recent history of Vrnjačka Banja.

If we analyze the official website of Vrnjačka Banja before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, it can be concluded that there are crucial differences. While the previous site lacked information and was badly laid out, the current site (<http://www.vrnjackabanja.co.rs/>) provides insight into all segments of this destination. The virtual tour that provides site visitors with an insight into the beauties of the Spa is an interesting feature. However, it is noticeable that the content on the site is geared towards cultural, artistic and entertainment tourist programs, while there is

very little data on the health tourism benefits of this destination. In order for Vrnjačka Banja to maintain its leading position in terms of visitor rate on the territory of the Republic of Serbia, information on its health benefits must be more transparent.

The official Facebook page of Vrnjačka Banja is followed by only 24,519 people, which is a very small percentage if we look at the monthly tourist turnover in this destination. This is much the same as with the social network Instagram, where only 9,075 people follow the official page of Vrnjačka Banja. It can be concluded that it is necessary to pay more attention to this type of promotion of health tourism since social networks are globally the most popular type of information about various tourist destinations.

In Montenegro, tourism has been identified as a sector of strategic importance. Tourism should become the leading sector for the local economic development, which would generate the highest foreign income and have the greatest potential that could bring diversity to the economy, strengthen entrepreneurship (especially the SME sector), attract investment, create a large number of sustainable businesses and initiate the social development of many communities.

One of the important steps in the Republic of Montenegro in terms of health tourism is the creation of the first cluster. The First Health Tourism Cluster in Montenegro is an association whose goals are to promote Montenegro as a health destination and connect leading experts in the field of health, tourism and related support activities in order to improve the overall offer of health tourism in Montenegro and jointly appear on regional and international markets. Tradition, infrastructure and professional human potential are the foundations on which the founders of the Cluster recognized the health industry as a key comparative advantage of Montenegro and emphasized the need for health tourism to become a recognizable regional brand.

Igalo spa was founded as the first Adriatic natural health resort. It expanded to include a children's ward with 200 beds and in the past decades it all grew into a modern, extremely well-equipped health, rehabilitation center with about 1,600 beds, professional medical staff and two higher education institutions that work here ("Queen Jelena" Nursing School and the Faculty of Applied Physiotherapy). The Institute "Dr. Simo Milošević" Igalo is one of the largest and most famous institutions for a multidisciplinary spa treatment in the Balkans. It is a pioneer of modern physical and preventive medicine, rehabilitation, thalassotherapy and wellness and has become one of the main international centers for the rehabilitation of children, adults and the elderly. The Igalo Institute deals with medical rehabilitation, preventive medicine (medical wellness) and health promotion. The institute is a specialized institution for the rehabilitation of patients with rheumatic, neurological, cardiovascular, and respiratory diseases, as well as for post-traumatic orthopedic rehabilitation, in adults and children. Special emphasis is placed on improving health within the framework of preventive medicine programs (for obesity, hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis) by introducing healthy lifestyles. Besides Montenegro, the guests mostly come from Scandinavia (primarily Norway), the Netherlands, Germany, Russia, and the ex-Yu area. The average age of guests is around 65, while, unfortunately, data on the full structure of guests is not available. Special emphasis is placed on improving health within the framework of preventive medicine programs (for obesity, hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis) by introducing healthy lifestyles. Besides Montenegro, the guests mostly come from Scandinavia (primarily Norway), the Netherlands, Germany, Russia, and the ex-Yu area. The last available data on visits to this spa was recorded before the Covid-19 pandemic: the total number of guests at the Institute in 2018 was 18,667 and in 2019 18,705.

The Igalo peloid (mud) should be placed as a single brand to the:

- people who, due to medical problems, expect to be healed by using mud;
- people who see Igalo as a zone of rest and relaxation right by the sea (wellness);
- professional and recreational athletes;
- local population who has health problems and are treated at the Institute.

We can assume that the majority of elderly people, pensioners, expect to recover from the use of Igalo mud, as evidenced by the data obtained at the Institute that the average age of their visitors is as much as 65. In order to promote health tourism based on medicinal mud, the Institute may enter into a contract with the health insurance of the former Yugoslavia countries, which stipulates that patients being sent to Igalo for recuperation at the expense of those countries. Also, presentations can be made in private hospitals that do not fall under the state health insurance system. Designing an advertising campaign and presentation in nursing homes, both in Montenegro and in the countries of the region, allows the people to be informed about the benefits of the Institute from its professional staff first-hand. Trial treatments can be offered to those interested to reassure them that this mud is not unpleasant in smell and consistency. It should also be considered that the offer expands to foreign markets by sending promoters to medical fairs and conferences, as well as creating web content in English. The institute has a sports and recreation center that includes: a sports pool (33x25m), sauna, table tennis, gym for small sports with Sika Pulastic surface, fitness room, bowling alley, therapeutic space, laboratory, etc., but this information is not visible on the available web content of the Institute.

People who see the beauties of wellness tourism in Igalo can get a broader picture of mud as a unique health phenomenon through digital marketing. The Institute's website itself can be updated with many marketing tools; for example, a video can be placed that includes a virtual tour through the accommodation and premises in the Institute where the programs are conducted, as well as through the beauties of Igalo spa. In digital marketing, if the emphasis is placed on promoting mud as a part of spa treatment, a wider potential group of users is obtained, and not only those who have health problems. Greater activity on social networks such as Facebook with the gathering of a larger number of visitors through marketing tools used for these purposes can contribute to higher tourist turnover from other countries that prefer wellness tourism. Currently, the Facebook page of the Institute has 7,387 likes, which is a very small number of people who visited, if we keep in mind that in the past year the number of real visitors to the Institute was about 2.5 times higher, and the number of those who indicated that they stayed there are about 11,000 in the Institute. It is generally necessary to pay more attention to the online reputation of the Institute, which is reflected in faster and more favorable responses to users who ask questions and comments via social networks. In that way, a more adequate relationship is established with potential users of the Institute's services.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to show the impact of digital marketing on health tourism in the Western Balkans during the Covid-19 pandemic. For that purpose, empirical research was conducted in four countries: the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Montenegro, the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Northern Macedonia. The research sample consists of 159 respondents, employed in organizations dealing with health tourism. These are the following organizations:

- “Merkur”, Vrnjačka Banja, Republic of Serbia,
- “Dr. Simo Milosevic Institute”, Igalo, Republic of Montenegro,
- “Health and Tourist Center Vrućica”, Banja Vrućica, Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina,
- “Negorski Health and Tourist Center”, Negorski Spa, Republic of Northern Macedonia.

The research was conducted in the middle of July 2021 and included filling in the questionnaire by the respondents. Due to the current situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the respondents were sent questionnaires by e-mail, with a detailed explanation that the research was voluntary, completely anonymous, and that the data would be used exclusively for research purposes.

Survey data were collected using a questionnaire containing three variables related to gender, age, and country of respondents. The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part contains questions about the socio-demographic structure of respondents, and the second part of the questionnaire contains ten items related to respondents' views on the impact of digital marketing on health tourism in the Western Balkans during the Covid-19 pandemic and is associated with a five-point scale. The questionnaire was originally compiled by the author of this paper. The offered answers were formed according to the Likert scale in the following way: 1 - *I disagree*, 2 - *I partially disagree*, 3 - *Undecided*, 4 - *I partially agree*, 5 - *I completely agree*. Observed variable: gender and country from which the respondents come. Also, a graphic presentation of the general demographic structure of the respondents is given.

The research started from one general and one special hypothesis.

- **Hypothesis One:** Digital marketing significantly contributed to the survival of health tourism during the Covid-19 virus pandemic in the Western Balkans.
- **Hypothesis Two:** Institutions in the Western Balkans that deal with health tourism effectively use digital marketing tools to promote their services.

In order to test the hypotheses, the χ^2 test was applied. The χ^2 test serves to investigate the relationship between two categorical variables. Each of them can have two or more categories. The test compares the frequencies or proportions of cases observed in each of the categories, with the values that would be expected if there was no relationship between the two variables. It is based on a cross table, i.e. on a table in which the categories of one variable are crossed with the categories of another.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The gender structure of the respondents is shown in Figure 1, and it can be concluded that more females (60%) than males (40%) participated in the research (Figure 1).

When it comes to age structure, most respondents are aged 36-40, and the least are persons under 35 (Figure 2).

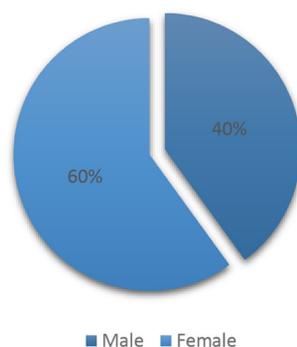


Figure 1. Gender structure of the sample of respondents

Source: Own research

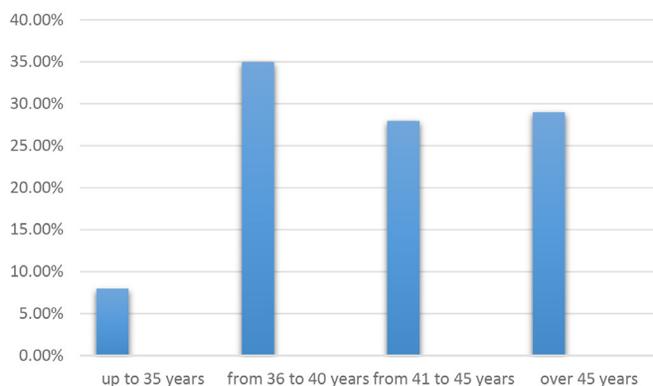


Figure 2. Age structure of the sample of respondents

Source: Own research

When it comes to the education of the total sample of respondents, it is concluded that the largest percentage of those who have a university degree (69%), and the smallest percentage of respondents have secondary education (6%) (Figure 3). The largest percentage of respondents comes from the Republic of Serbia (36%), followed by the Republic of Montenegro (27%), while 19% of respondents from the Republic of BiH participated in the total sample, and 18% from the Republic of Northern Macedonia (Figure 4).

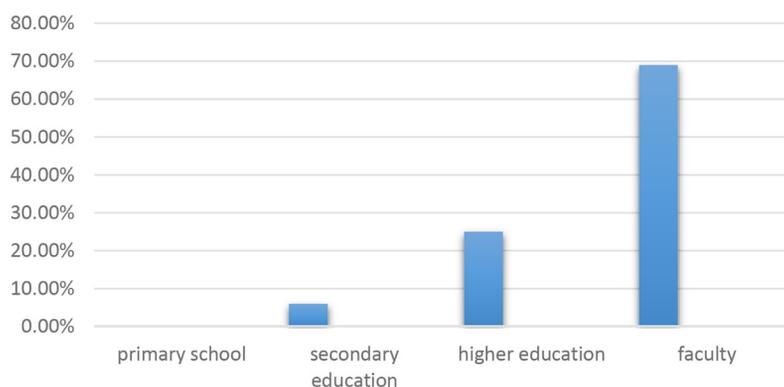


Figure 3. Display of the sample according to education

Source: Own research

Further in the paper, a tabular presentation of the χ^2 test of the influence of variables is given - the ratio of the answers of the respondents from different countries for each statement from the questionnaire.

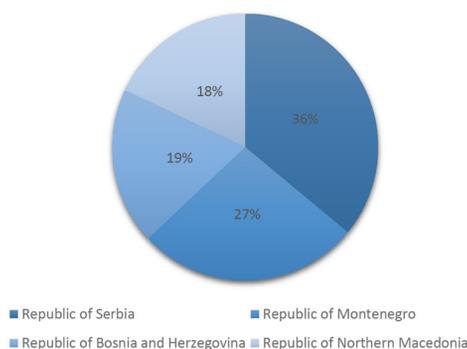


Figure 4. Percentage of respondents by country of origin

Source: Own research

Table 2. χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the first question from the questionnaire

A group of respondents	N	The institution where I am employed has a digital marketing strategy that is managed during the promotion of health tourism.					χ^2	p
		I disagree	partially disagree	undecided	I partially agree	I completely agree		
Female	60%	10,0%	9 15,0%	8,33%	36,67%	30,0%	1,195	0,879
Male	40%	10,0%	12,50%	12,50%	32,50%	27,50%		
Total	100%)	12,0%	14,0%	10%	35%	29%		

Source: Own research

Table 2 shows χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the first question from the questionnaire. The level of statistical significance is higher than the set critical value ($p=0,05$), which further implies that there is no statistically significant difference between respondents in terms of agreement with the statement *The institution where I am employed has a digital marketing strategy that is managed during the promotion of health tourism* in relation to gender. The following chart shows the percentage distribution of respondents' attitudes in relation to the first question/statement.

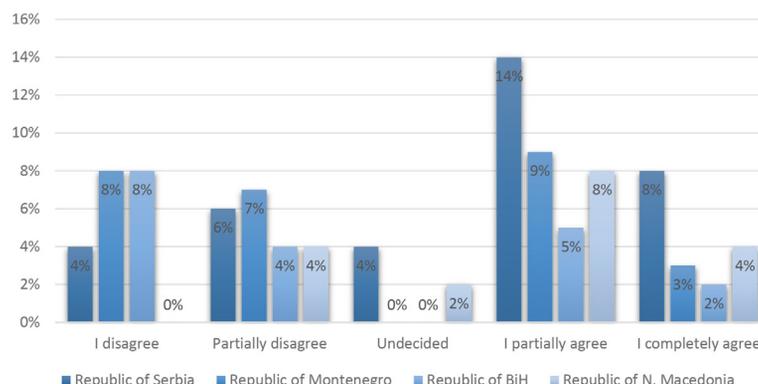


Figure 5. Percentage distribution of respondents' attitudes in relation to the first question/statement

Source: Own research

From the data shown in Figure 5, it can be concluded that the largest percentage of respondents from the Republic of Serbia answered *I partially agree* and *I completely agree* (22%), while the smallest percentage of respondents from the Republic of BiH gave a positive answer.

Table 3 shows χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the second question from the questionnaire.

Table 3. χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the second question from the questionnaire

A group of respondents	N	During the pandemic, the institution in which I am employed drastically changed the way I promoted services.					χ^2	p
		I disagree	partially disagree	undecided	I partially agree	I completely agree		
Female	60%	13,33%	11,67%	11,67%	28,33%	35,0%	16,179	0,003
Male	40%	27,50%	35,0%	12,50%	12,50%	12,50%		
Total	100%	19,0%	21,0%	12,0%	22,0%	26,0%		

Source: Own research

Table 3 shows that a statistically significant difference was obtained between respondents in relation to gender ($p < 0,05$). The strength of the connections between the variables is of medium intensity. The differences in the answers are shown in the following Figure 6.

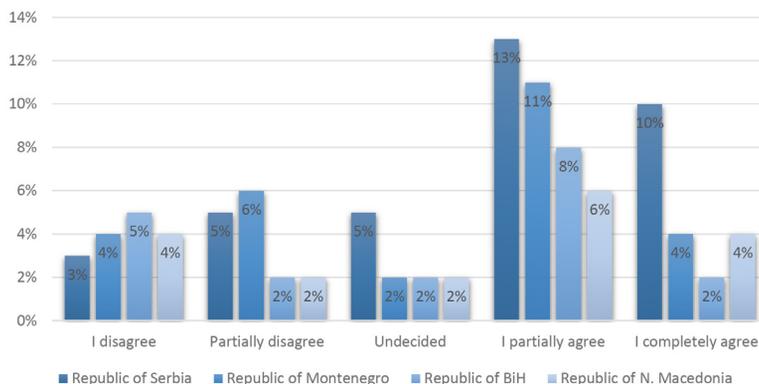


Figure 6. Percentage distribution of respondents' attitudes in relation to the second question/statement

Source: Own research

From the presented data, it can be concluded that the largest percentage of respondents from the Republic of Serbia expressed a position of partial or complete agreement. Therefore, the respondents from the Republic of Serbia realized that the institution in which they were employed changed the way of promoting services in accordance with the new situation. It is concluded that the respondents from the Republic of Serbia are mostly familiar with the way of promoting the services of their institution and the way of working in them.

Table 4. χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the third question from the questionnaire

A group of respondents	N	The institution where I work promoted its services exclusively through digital marketing during the Covid-19 virus pandemic.					χ^2	p
		I disagree	partially disagree	undecided	I partially agree	I completely agree		
Female	60%	38,33%	23,33%	10,0%	18,33%	10,0%	0,361	0,986
Male	40%	35,0%	22,50%	12,50%	17,50%	12,50%		
Total	100%	37,0%	23,0%	11,0%	18,0%	11,0%		

Source: Own research

When it comes to the claim: *The institution where I am employed promoted its services exclusively through digital marketing during the Covid-19 virus pandemic*, there is no statistically significant difference in relation to the gender of the respondents ($p > 0,05$).

The largest percentage of respondents from the Republic of Montenegro (31%), then from the Republic of Serbia and Republic of N. Macedonia (29%), and the least from the Republic of BiH (11%) agreed with the statement *The institution where I work promoted its services exclusively through digital marketing during the Covid-19 virus pandemic*.

In relation to the claim *During the pandemic, the percentage of visitors dropped significantly*, there is a significant statistical difference in relation to gender ($\chi^2(4, N=159)=14,136, p=0,007, \text{Cramer } V=0,376$). Among females, there are relatively more who agree with the above statement compared to males. The strength of the connections between the variables is of medium intensity.

Table 5. χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the fourth question from the questionnaire

A group of respondents	N	During the pandemic, the percentage of visitors dropped significantly.					χ^2	p
		I disagree	partially disagree	undecided	I partially agree	I completely agree		
Female	60,0%	8,33%	8,33%	6,67%	48,33%	28,33%	14,136	0,007
Male	40,0%	20,0%	27,50%	12,50%	25,00%	15,00%		
Total	100,0%	13,0%	16,0%	9,0%	39,0%	23,0%		

Source: Own research

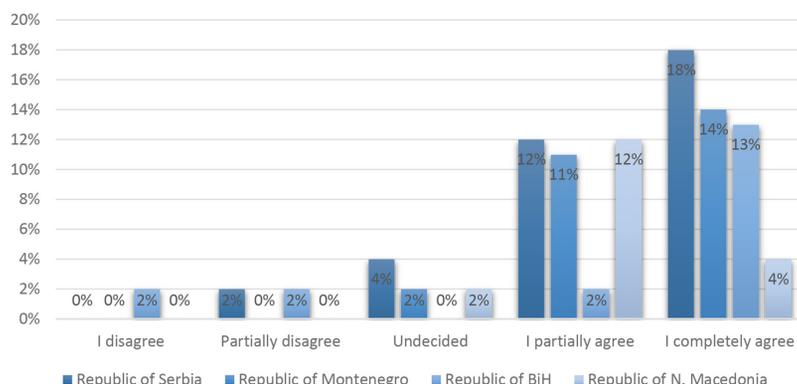


Figure 7. Percentage distribution of respondents' attitudes in relation to the fourth question/ statement

Source: Own research

From the presented data, it can be concluded that respondents from all observed countries were very well informed about the attendance of their institutions and that they recognized a drastic drop in visits during the pandemic, which was expected.

Table 6. χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the fifth question from the questionnaire

A group of respondents	N	The website of the institution where I am employed was updated during the pandemic with more convenient information.					χ^2	p
		I disagree	partially disagree	undecided	I partially agree	I completely agree		
Female	60,0%	10,0%	11,67%	26,67%	31,67%	20,0%	2,765	0,598
Male	40,0%	12,50%	20,0%	17,50%	25,0%	25,0%		
Total	100,0%	11,0%	15,0%	23,0%	29,0%	22,0%		

Source: Own research

Table 6 shows that there is no statistically significant difference by gender in relation to the claim *The website of the institution where I am employed was updated during the pandemic with more convenient information* ($p > 0.05$).

Respondents from all countries almost in equal percentage completely agree with the stated statement. Therefore, respondents from all observed countries, except the Republic of BiH, recognized the changes made by the management regarding the updating of sites during the pandemic, as well as the importance of this action.

Table 7. χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the sixth question from the questionnaire

A group of respondents	N	The institution where I work has become even more active in promoting social media services during the pandemic.					χ^2	p
		I disagree	partially disagree	undecided	I partially agree	I completely agree		
Female	60,0%	15,0%	15,0%	23,33%	26,67%	20,0%	1,240	0,872
Male	40,0%	12,50%	17,50%	22,50%	20,0%	27,5%		
Total	100,0%	14,0%	16,0%	23,0%	24,0%	23,0%		

Source: Own research

Table 7 also shows that there is no statistically significant difference by gender in relation to the sixth question ($\chi^2(4, N=159)=1,240, p=0,872$). However, there is a percentage difference in responses relative to the countries from which respondents come. Namely, respondents from the Republic of Montenegro and the Republic of Serbia mostly gave positively oriented answers (59%), while a high percentage of respondents from the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of BiH expressed an attitude of indecision (21%).

Table 8. χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the seventh question from the questionnaire

A group of respondents	N	Visitors pay great attention to the comments of other visitors and thus decide to visit our institution, which was especially intensified during the pandemic.					χ^2	p
		I disagree	partially disagree	undecided	I partially agree	I completely agree		
Female	60,0%	10,0%	15,0%	25,0%	25,0%	25,0%	2,823	0,588
Male	40,0%	12,50%	12,50%	12,50%	30,0%	32,50%		
Total	100,0%	11,0%	14,0%	20,0%	27,0%	28,0%		

Source: Own research

There is no statistically significant difference by gender in relation to the claim *Visitors pay great attention to the comments of other visitors and thus make the decision to visit our institution, which was especially intensified during the pandemic* ($p>0,05$).

Respondents from the Republic of Montenegro and the Republic of Serbia mostly expressed a position of complete agreement, while the largest percentage of respondents from the Republic of Macedonia expressed a position of partial agreement and a large percentage of the Republic of BiH expressed a position of indecision.

Table 9. χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the eighth question from the questionnaire

A group of respondents	N	Social media marketing enabled direct interaction with tourists during the pandemic, which is a huge advantage over traditional marketing activities.					χ^2	p
		I disagree	partially disagree	undecided	I partially agree	I completely agree		
Female	60,0%	13,33%	8,33%	16,67%	33,33%	28,33%	1,693	0,792
Male	40,0%	12,50%	15,0%	12,50%	37,5%	22,50%		
Total	100,0%	13,0%	11,0%	15,0%	35,0%	26,0%		

Source: Own research

Respondents' attitudes towards the claim: *Social media marketing enabled direct interaction with tourists during the pandemic, which is a huge advantage over traditional marketing activities* **did not differ according to gender, i.e. no statistically significant difference was found.**

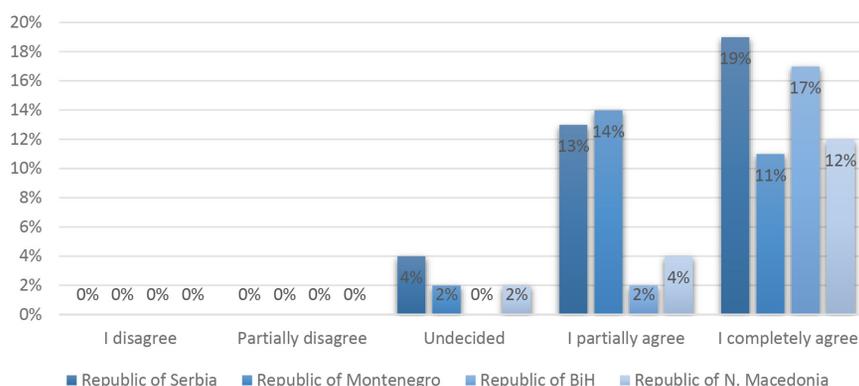


Figure 8. Percentage distribution of respondents' attitudes in relation to the eighth question/statement

Source: Own research

Figure 8 shows the percentage distribution of respondents' attitudes in relation to the eighth statement. Namely, respondents from the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro gave an equal, high percentage of answers (31%) oriented towards partial and complete agreement.

Table 10. χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the ninth question from the questionnaire

A group of respondents	N	I believe that during the pandemic, the management of the institution recognized the need to introduce innovations such as more active promotion of services on social networks.					χ^2	p
		I disagree	partially disagree	undecided	I partially agree	I completely agree		
Female	60,0%	8,33%	10,0%	25,0%	41,67%	15,0%	11,446	0,022
Male	40,0%	22,50%	22,50%	25,0%	15,0%	15,0%		
Total	100,0%	14,0%	15,0%	25,0%	31,0%	15,0%		

Source: Own research

Table 10 shows that a statistically significant difference was obtained in relation to gender when it comes to the ninth question. Namely, $\chi^2(4, N=159)=11,446, p=0,022, \text{Cramer } V=0,338$. The strength of the connections between the variables is of medium intensity. Among females, there are relatively more who do not agree with the above statement compared to males.

Respondents from the Republic of Serbia mostly expressed a position of complete agreement, while respondents from the Republic of N. Macedonia in a high percentage (11%) refrained from answering.

Table 11. χ^2 test the influence of the gender variable in relation to the tenth question from the questionnaire

A group of respondents	N	I believe that digital marketing has had a positive impact on health tourism in my country in general and has contributed to the maintenance of this important industry.					χ^2	p
		I disagree	partially disagree	undecided	I partially agree	I completely agree		
Female	60,0%	8,33%	11,67%	11,67%	31,67%	22,0%	3,966	0,411
Male	40,0%	15,0%	20,0%	12,5%	17,5%	35,0%		
Total	100,0%	11,0%	15,0%	12,0%	26,0%	36,0%		

Source: Own research

In relation to the last statement from the questionnaire: *I believe that digital marketing has had a positive impact on health tourism in my country in general and has contributed to the maintenance of this important industry*, no statistically significant difference was found in relation to gender ($p > 0,05$).

However, there is a significant percentage difference in the attitudes of respondents from the observed countries. While the respondents from the Republic of Serbia largely partially or completely agree with the statement, the respondents from the Republic of N. Macedonia expressed a position of partial disagreement. Respondents from the Republic of Montenegro show an intense division in relation to the offered answers.

6. CONCLUSION

Since we live in an age of digitalization and expansion of information and communication technologies, it is evident that even in times of crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact of digital marketing is of great importance for the survival of tourism. This is especially true of health tourism, as health has become a priority for people around the world. This is also the case in the countries of the Western Balkans.

The results of the research indicate that in all countries, the application of digital marketing was almost equally taken into account when it comes to the promotion of health tourism services. The management of the surveyed institutions saw the importance and need to intensify the promotion in this way in order to reach as many visitors as possible.

Inspecting the presented results, it is concluded that Hypothesis One: *Digital Marketing significantly contributed to the survival of health tourism during the Covid-19 virus pandemic in the Western Balkans* was confirmed, as almost the same percentage of respondents expressed their positive views on this topic.

Hypothesis Two: *There are statistically significant gender differences compared to the claim that health care institutions in the Western Balkans effectively use digital marketing tools to promote their services* has not been confirmed, as statistically significant differences were found in only three out of ten surveyed claims.

Certainly, the observed countries of the Western Balkans should pay more attention to harmonization with EU standards and global trends when it comes to promoting health tourism services. Further research can move towards examining the impact of digital marketing on health tourism even after the Covid-19 virus pandemic, which is still in full swing.

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