

Small-scale sport events and destination image on Instagram

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Abstract

Small-Scale Sport Events (SSSE) bring multiple benefits to the territories that host them by helping to promote sustainable tourism, generate economic impact, and overcome tourism seasonality. In addition, they can contribute to the positioning of the territories and to the creation and improvement of their destination image (DI). Given these outcomes, many destination managers have opted to organize and host this type of events. In turn, Instagram has become a powerful platform for creating destination image and has turned users into active agents in the creation and projection of the DI. This has meant that DI is no longer shaped only through official destination channels, but also created through the perception of multiple users. Thus, this research aimed to examine the similarities and differences of the destination image projected on Instagram by organizers and participants of Small-Scale Sport Events. The content analysis of 1,315 photographs posted on Instagram by event organizers and participants was the method used in this study. The results show that user-generated photographs have the capacity to contribute to the creation of DI. Results also reveal significant differences between the various events, and between the organizers and participants, especially in the cognitive dimension of DI. The differences in the projection of DI detected in the results suggest that it is necessary to actively recognize and align the organizers of Small-Scale Sport Events with the rest of the destination's tourism stakeholders to project an image that highlights the destination attributes of the territory in a coherent and unified manner.

Key Words: Small-Scale Sport Events, Destination Image, Instagram, Sports tourism.

Introduction

Small-Scale Sport Events (SSSE) have grown enormously in popularity among not only city and regional Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO), but also among academicians (Bazanella et al., 2019; Glabiszewski, 2020). SSSE have been shown to produce strong economic impact (Kenelly, 2017; Gulak-Lipka and Jagielski, 2020), help position the territory as a tourist destination (Malchrowicz and Poczta, 2018; Salgado et al., 2018), positively affect the destination branding (Tasci et al., 2018) and have an effective return on investment (Milovanovic et al., 2021). Recently, of particular interest is the seismic shift in the way these events and host destinations are presented (Nixon et al., 2017). Social media has revolutionized marketing in general, and destination and event marketing in particular (Laurell and Björner, 2018). One of the most popular platforms, Instagram, has 1.9 billion daily active users who cumulatively post nearly 1.000 pictures every second (Omnicore, 2021). According to the same source, over 2 million businesses connect with stakeholders on Instagram. In terms of tourism, social media is one of the main drivers of tourists' choice (Assaker, 2020). Actually, 80% of people who want to travel ask for recommendations from their social media connections (Lund et al., 2018). Recently, Taberner and Juncà (2021) found that the pictures shared in Instagram by not only event organizers, but also participants can contribute to the destination image (DI) formation. But these authors and others (Plunkett and Brooks, 2018; Daries et al., 2019; Pouder et al., 2018; Prokopenko et al., 2020) argue that more needs to be understood about the use of social media in sport event tourism. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the similarities and differences in the destination image projected on Instagram by organizers and participants of SSSE.

Literature review

Destination image and small-scale sport events

Given the growing competition to attract visitors, more and more tourist destinations have opted to strategically create a unique brand, a destination brand, which allows them to attract tourists (Yang et al., 2020). The DI, one of the pillars of the destination brand, is the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination (Crompton, 1979) and affects the behavior of visitors and their return and recommendation intentions (Arefieva et al., 2021; Kumar and Panda, 2019).

The DI is presented in three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and conative (Gartner, 1994). The cognitive dimension is related to tourists' knowledge and beliefs about the elements of the destination; the affective, to the emotional responses to the destination; and the conative, to tourists' behavior and their intentions to revisit or recommend the destination (Agapito et al., 2013).

Sport plays a central role in the formation of images of the territory (Könecke and Kwiatkowski, 2016) due to its universal nature, the visibility it generates and the media interest that accompanies it (Matecki, 2010). Within this field, sporting events can be particularly useful for the creation of DI (Rein and Shields, 2007). Thus, they have been used to improve the image of destinations (Mainolfi and Marino, 2020) from three different perspectives: as cobranding partners with the destination, as destination extensions and as features of the destination (Chalip and Costa, 2005).

Although most of the literature has focused on the benefits that mega-events and hallmark events can bring to the territories, since the early 2000s many destination managers have realised the potential of SSSE (Kaplanidou and Gibson, 2010). SSSE are small events, with more participants than spectators, which are usually organized on a recurrent basis and generate limited media interest compared to large events (Gibson et al., 2012). Running and trail running races, cycling rallies and triathlons are usually included in this type of event (Kenelly, 2017). Despite their low impact at a global or national level, SSSE tend to be important activities for the regional destinations that host them, as they contribute to tourism development (Malchrowitz-Mosko and Pocza, 2018; Montesinos-Saura et al., 2018) and represent a good opportunity to improve the affinity of tourists with the territory that hosts them (Argusa et al., 2009).

Instagram and destination image

Traditionally, DMO were responsible of the DI creation process (Picazo and Moreno-Gil, 2019). However, with the advent of the Internet, DMOs have ceded part of the control in this process and have begun to share it with users, who have become content creators through social networks (Hanan and Putit, 2014). Given this phenomenon, brands have adopted social networks as an ideal marketing channel to connect with consumers (Lund et al., 2018).

The tourism sector has also been immersed in this paradigm shift and, as of today, many destinations have already incorporated communication through social networks as part of their marketing strategy (Laurell and Björner, 2018). Through these tools, users have acquired a great capacity to influence the decision-making of other consumers (Kim and Johnson, 2006) through user-generated content, which is content published by non-professional users on publicly accessible channels such as social networks (Mak, 2017). All this has meant that the DI is no longer formed only through official destination channels (Arefieva et al., 2021) but is also created through the perception of multiple users via social networks (Varkaris and Neuhofer, 2017).

One of the most influential social networks in the tourism sector is Instagram. According to Kuhzady and Ghasemi (2019), the attractiveness of images compared to text has turned Instagram into an ideal channel for business communication. Images and visual content are, on the one hand, a very powerful tool for examining the representation of a destination, and on the other hand, a very useful platform for the projection of destination images (Paül, 2018).

Recently, several authors have highlighted the possibilities of Instagram in the formation of DI (Hanan and Putit, 2014; Lund et al., 2018; Kuhzady and Ghasemi, 2019; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Lam et al., 2020; Nixon et al., 2017) and have highlighted the importance of researching its uses in this field, although there is still limited literature on the subject.

Material & methods

The destination chosen as the territory to investigate this phenomenon was the Osona region, in the province of Barcelona, Catalonia (Spain). Specifically, we analyzed photographs associated with four SSSE, which gathered 4670 participants in 2019. The selected events were the Cabrerès BTT (CBTT), mountain biking, and Pels Camins dels Matxos (PCDM), Trail del Bisaura (TDB) and Trail Fonts del Montseny (TFM), trailrunning.

The method used was content analysis. This non-intrusive and replicable technique has been used in a wide range of studies related to sport management (Nixon et al., 2017), tourism (Sun et al., 2021), social networks (Paül, 2018) and DI (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Varkaris and Neuhofer, 2017; Nixon et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2021).

Instrument

The instrument used for this investigation (Table 1) was developed by Taberner and Juncà (2021) based on several previous studies (Mak, 2017; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Nixon et al., 2017; Aramendia-Muneta, 2021). The instrument is divided into two blocks corresponding to the cognitive and affective dimensions of DI. The first dimension includes 18 destination attributes classified into four categories: nature, culture, people, and event. In the second, there are two dimensions related to the affective image: emotions and tone.

Table 1. Research instrument.

Dimension	Categories	Attributes
Cognitive dimension	Nature	Mountain
		Forest
		Water
		Countryside
		Animals
		Others
	Culture	Urban
		Cultural Heritage
		Gastronomy
		Others
	People	Racing
		Atmosphere
		Cultural heritage
		Others
	Event	Prize elements
		Yes
		No
		Event infrastructure
		Yes
		No
Affective dimension	Emotions	Joy/happiness
		Calm/serenity
		Excitement/challenge
		Sadness/Nostalgia
	Tone	Positive
		Neutral
		Negative

Data collection

During the month of October 2020, using the 4k Stogram software, all the images posted on Instagram throughout 2019 by the organizers on the official profiles of the races (122 of CBTT, 90 of PCDM, 137 of TDB and 44 of TFM) and those published by the participants using the hashtags related to the races (175 of CBTT, 314 of PCDM, 260 of TDB and 183 of TFM) were downloaded. A total of 1,315 photographs were collected.

Data analysis

The photographs were analyzed by two coders specialised in sport events and with previous experience in content analysis. To test intercoder reliability, a random sample of 150 photographs was selected. The percentage of coincidence between the two analysts was 92%, a figure considerably higher than that recommended by Neuendorf (2002).

Regarding the analysis of the images themselves, all the elements of the cognitive dimension were considered destination attributes (DA), except when the elements 'People Racing' and 'People Others' appeared alone, since their isolated presence did not allow us to relate the photograph to any specific attribute of the destination. Once all the photographs had been analyzed, the main indicators were described.

Results***Destination Attributes***

The images of the events published on Instagram contain DA at different levels. Depending on the tests and the perspective of the organizers and participants, various differences are observed (Table 2).

As far as the organizers are concerned, the photographs contain, on average, 2.27 DA. In the comparison between tests, the images that contain the most attributes on average are those of the CBTT (2.52) while those that contain the fewest are those of the TFM (1.71). From the perspective of the participants, the average score for the photographs is 2.17 DA. CBTT participants are the ones who, on average, show the highest average DA (2.45). On the other hand, the images taken by the TFM participants (2.05) show the lowest DA, followed closely by those of the TDB (2.09).

Table 2. Average of Destination Attributes in the photographs

	O	P
CBTT	2,52	2,45
PCDM	2,26	2,21
TDB	2,26	2,09
TFM	1,71	2,05
Total average	2,27	2,17

O: organizers. P: participants.

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In terms of the number of DA presented in the images, in three of the four events the most frequent photographs uploaded by the organizers are those containing three elements (Table 3). From the participants' point of view, this pattern is repeated in two events (CBTT and PCDM). In the other tests, more frequent use is made of photographs with one or two attributes.

Table 3. Number of Destination Attributes in the photographs

	1		2		3		4		> 4	
	O	P	O	P	O	P	O	P	O	P
CBTT	18%	18%	21%	28%	47%	43%	11%	9%	3%	1%
PCDM	31%	28%	21%	30%	28%	34%	10%	5%	0%	1%
TDB	28%	34%	27%	34%	32%	22%	9%	9%	2%	1%
TFM	50%	35%	31%	28%	17%	31%	2%	6%	0%	0%

Cognitive Dimension

In reference to the cognitive dimension, the presence of the four categories analyzed in the photographs also shows some similarities and several important differences between events (Table 4). In terms of similarities, the category that appears most frequently in all the tests, both on the part of organizers and participants, is "People". However, in one of the tests (CBTT) it is slightly lower than in the others.

Table 4. Presence of the categories in the photographs

	Natura		Cultura		People		Event elements	
	O	P	O	P	O	P	O	P
CBTT	72%	75%	33%	34%	77%	77%	39%	33%
PCDM	38%	62%	52%	38%	94%	86%	46%	40%
TDB	67%	73%	45%	41%	93%	90%	39%	32%
TFM	79%	49%	26%	51%	90%	93%	21%	33%

The second most popular category is "nature", with very similar values in three of the four events. Only the organizers of one of the races (PCDM) have much lower values in this category. In the comparison between organizers and participants, similar values are observed in two cases (CBTT and TDB) and different values in the other two (PCDM and TFM). The "Culture" category, on the other hand, shows differences between the different events. The organizers of PDCM are the ones who incorporate the most cultural elements (52%) and the organizers of TFM are the ones who incorporate the least (26%). On the other hand, the participants in this course are the ones who share cultural attributes most frequently (51%). Finally, the "Event Elements" also appear to a different extent depending on the event, with PCDM being the event where they appear most frequently (46%) and TFM the least frequently (21%). The differences between organizers and participants are minimal. The nature category shows similar values among the different events, both on the part of organizers and participants (Table 5). The "Forest" element appears most frequently, followed by "Mountains" and "Countryside". The main difference between tests is the appearance of "Water" as the third element in one of the tests (CBTT) by the participants.

Table 5. Distribution of the Destination Attributes in Nature category.

	Mountains		Forests		Water		Countryside		Animals	
	O	P	O	P	O	P	O	P	O	P
CBTT	38%	43%	48%	46%	25%	33%	30%	0%	2%	0%
PCDM	18%	30%	26%	48%	0%	7%	11%	14%	0%	1%
TDB	23%	24%	48%	47%	9%	5%	21%	17%	2%	0%
TFM	29%	14%	55%	39%	2%	0%	7%	14%	0%	6%

Urban elements appear most frequently in the "Culture" category, which does not show major differences between events or between organizers and participants (Table 6). The attributes related to "Heritage" occupy the second position, followed by those related to "Gastronomy".

Table 6. Distribution of the Destination Attributes in Culture category.

	Urban		Heritage		Gastronomy		Others	
	O	P	O	P	O	P	O	P
CBTT	30%	24%	2%	9%	3%	3%	0%	0%
PCDM	48%	34%	5%	3%	2%	2%	0%	0%
TDB	27%	24%	13%	18%	7%	1%	2%	1%
TFM	19%	44%	5%	7%	5%	4%	0%	1%

In the "People" category, the most common element is "People Racing", both on the part of organizers and participants (Table 7). Only in the case of the participants in one of the events (PCDM), the "Atmosphere" element is slightly more common than "People Racing". In fact, this same element is the only one that shows significant differences with respect to the other events, which follow a similar pattern.

Table 7. Distribution of the Destination Attributes in People category.

	Racing		Atmosphere		Heritage		Others	
	O	P	O	P	O	P	O	P
CBTT	61%	57%	35%	27%	0%	0%	8%	7%
PCDM	60%	75%	62%	36%	6%	3%	17%	3%
TDB	67%	68%	30%	32%	0%	0%	17%	8%
TFM	86%	74%	24%	26%	0%	0%	0%	6%

The last category of the cognitive image is the one that refers to event-related elements (Table 8). In this case, "Infrastructure" elements appear more frequently than "Prize Elements", except in the case of the organizers of one of the tests (TFM), who show "Prize Elements" more frequently (21%) than "Infrastructure" (5%).

Table 8. Distribution of the Destination Attributes in Event category.

	Prize elements		Infrastructure	
	O	P	O	P
CBTT	5%	9%	35%	25%
PCDM	5%	5%	44%	36%
TDB	13%	11%	31%	30%
TFM	21%	8%	5%	31%

Affective dimension

In relation to the affective dimension, two variables were analyzed: emotions and tone. About emotions, very similar values were observed in all the events, both on the part of organizers and participants (Table 9). The emotion that appears most frequently is "Joy and Happiness". From the organizers' point of view, in three of the four events it appears in more than 50% of the photographs. On the other hand, the organizers of TFM present a value of around 30%. In their case, the main emotion in the photographs is "Excitement and Challenge", with a value of over 62%. In this emotion, the rest of the tests are situated in values close to 40%.

Table 9. Emotions in the photographs

	Joy/ Happiness		Calm/ Serenity		Excitement/ Challenge		Sadness/ Nostalgia	
	O	P	O	P	O	P	O	P
CBTT	52%	53%	20%	19%	29%	27%	0%	0%
PCDM	55%	44%	7%	14%	38%	42%	0%	0%
TDB	55%	48%	7%	9%	38%	43%	0%	0%
TFM	31%	46%	7%	10%	62%	44%	0%	0%

Ultimately, the tone that emerges from the photographs is eminently positive, both on the part of organizers and participants (Table 10). In all cases, the values obtained were over 85%. It should also be noted that no images from any of the tests were negative.

Table 10. Tone of the photographs

	Positive		Neutral		Negative	
	O	P	O	P	O	P
CBTT	86%	89%	14%	11%	0%	0%
PCDM	95%	89%	5%	11%	0%	0%
TDB	98%	88%	2%	12%	0%	0%
TFM	98%	93%	2%	7%	0%	0%

Discussion

Regarding the cognitive dimension, the fact that the images in this study contain, on average, more than two DA coincides with the studies that place Instagram as a good platform for creating DI (Arefieva et al., 2021; Kuhzady and Ghasemi, 2019; Lam et al., 2020; Camprubi and Planas, 2020). It also coincides with other studies that have studied the projection of DI through Instagram that the two types of DA that most appear in the images refer to "Nature" and "Urban" (Mak, 2017; Kuhzady and Ghasemi, 2019; Iglesias-Sánchez, 2020).

In this sense, two of the elements that make up the category of 'Nature', 'Forest' and 'Mountains', have a notable and very similar presence in all the events and, also, among organizers and participants. On the other hand, all the other DA, both in the 'Nature' category and in the other categories, appear in very different ways both between events and between organizers and participants, without a homogeneous pattern of behavior being observed between them. The differences between the different events and the different actors may be due to the

organizers' desire to satisfy the basic needs of the participants in the SSSE, especially those centred on a good route in a beautiful, natural environment (Newland and Aicher, 2018; Getz and McConell, 2014). In this way, the rest of the attractions of the territory, which are more distant from the needs of the participants, are presented in very unequal ways and with much less presence both by organizers and participants. In this sense, as Green et al. (2016) and Kavaratzis (2012) point out, it is essential to align the different stakeholders involved in the creation of DI, especially from destination marketing organizations (DMOs), to create a DI that highlights all the destination attributes in a coherent and unified manner that also allows the destination to be positioned on the basis of the SSSE.

The other element that makes up the image of the destination, the emotional dimension, does project a unique and coherent DI among all the actors and events involved. However, the main difference with respect to other studies carried out on tourist destinations not related to sporting events (Mak et al., 2017; Iglesias-Sánchez, 2020) is the appearance of the emotion "Challenge and Excitement". This emotion is present in the SSSE analyzed at levels like those of the emotion "Joy and Happiness". Between the two emotions, they reach a presence of over 90% in all the photographs of the events. The prominent presence of both emotions, together with the positive tone and the null presence of photographs with a negative tone, make the SSSE project an eminently positive emotion in the DI of the territory, a key factor for behavioral intentions to return to the destination (Milovanovic et al., 2021).

Conclusions

The results obtained in this study offer several practical implications for both DMO managers and SSSE organizers. First, they raise awareness of the potential of this type of event for rural destinations, which can take advantage of the content generated by users and organizers to effectively reach new visitors. Next, the differences detected in the DA of the photographs published by the organizers provide vital information on the importance of aligning the vision of the different stakeholders of the destination to maximize this opportunity to project a unified DI. In this sense, it can be key to create platforms for collaboration between event organizers, DMO managers and other tourism stakeholders. The results, moreover, allow us to understand which elements of the events and the destination are most shared by participants on Instagram. In relation to this, the organizers can modify various elements of the course, the start or finish area to obtain greater control of the race and destination images that are shown. Finally, participants can even be encouraged to share singular DAs, that agree with the rest of the local stakeholders, to reduce the differences between the organizers and the participants.

While these findings are enlightening and promising, given the scarce literature on these concepts and the size of the sample of this study, future research is needed to continue generating knowledge about the role of destination stakeholders in the projection of DI on Instagram in the context of SSSE. Thus, it could be beneficial to examine this phenomenon in new destinations and other types of events and, especially, to know the perspective and impressions of both SSSE organizers and DMO managers. Another avenue for future research could be related to the communication behaviors of SSSE participants on Instagram and their contribution to DI: the reasons that motivate them to post, to share the posts of their contacts and organizers, and the factors that affect engagement in these types of posts.

Conflicts of interest – The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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