



# HOW CAN DESTINATION MANAGEMENT ORGANISATIONS ENHANCE THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING COMMUNICATION IN THE FIELD OF SPORTS TOURISM?

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## Abstract

*Purpose* – Sports tourism is one of the fastest-growing tourism sectors. Based on the uses and gratifications theory, this study investigates how different characteristics (i.e., information, entertainment, and engagement value) of destination management organisations' (DMO) social media posts on sports tourism influence potential sports tourists' social media usage, booking intentions, and intentions to spread positive word of mouth (WOM) about the destination.

*Methodology* – We collected the study data through a combination of an online survey and paper-and-pencil questionnaires and used PLS-SEM to analyse the hypothesised relationships.

*Findings* – Our results demonstrate that a high information value of a DMO's post triggers booking intentions, while posts additionally need to have a high engagement value when it is also important to increase social media users' WOM, and a third post characteristic – entertainment value – is essential when future social media usage intentions are to be increased.

*Originality of the research* – The results of our study enable DMOs to choose the most critical post characteristics (information, entertainment, and engagement value) according to the respective objective pursued with their social media communication (i.e., increasing booking intentions, WOM, or future social media usage intentions). Prior research has not provided such insights that can enhance communication strategies.

**Keywords** Social media marketing, sports tourism, user engagement, entertainment, destination management organisations (DMO), uses and gratification theory

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## INTRODUCTION

According to the World Tourism Organisation (WTO, n.d.), sports tourism is one of the fastest-growing tourism sectors. Offering sports facilities and activities is important to address seasonality issues and enable mature and emerging tourism destinations to diversify (Leal Londoño et al., 2021). The use of social network sites for marketing communication is growing in all sectors. Social network sites play a crucial role in touristic decision-making processes (Azazi & Shaed, 2020). In the sports (management) sector, social media marketing communication is gaining more and more importance and offers many benefits for firms and associations (Filo et al., 2015; Herrera-Torres et al., 2019). Moreover, sports tourists use the Internet and social media more intensively and travel agencies or tourism offices less often as information sources than other tourists (Paniza-Prados et al., 2019). For destination management organisations (DMO), efficient and effective social media marketing communication about sports tourism is essential as sports tourism addresses the specific and narrow target group of sports enthusiasts and professional athletes who are interested in sports-related leisure activities, training or competition, and travel. It is essential to develop a better understanding of these target consumers' reactions to social media marketing communication in sports tourism to establish an efficient social media marketing strategy.

Previous research on the effects of social media communication in sports or contexts similar to sports tourism often focuses on major sports events (e.g., the studies of Banyai & Potwarka, 2012 and Hayes et al., 2019), on analysing posted content through social network analysis (Kim et al., 2023), data mining in social networks, or on netnographic approaches (e.g., the studies of Bodaghi & Oliveira, 2021 and Su et al., 2020). Thus, despite a growing body of research on the effects of social media marketing communication, only some studies explain factors that affect social network use among sports tourists (e.g., the studies of Prado-Gasco et al., 2017; Einsle & Escalera Izquierdo, 2022). For instance, in the field of mega sports events, engagement with the content and effective communication have been shown to influence the online experience, which in turn affects users' behavioural intentions towards such events (Kharouf et al. 2020). Overall, research on consumer reactions to social media marketing communication in the field of sports tourism remains limited, although social media communication is a valuable tool for DMOs (Kumpu et al., 2021) that they can use to inform potential customers about the typical sports activities and events of a destination. Companies' social media posts can provide information, promote an offer, foster relations (Ahuja & Medury, 2010), or provide a combination of these aspects. For DMOs, we argue accordingly that their social media posts can provide more or less detailed information about the destination, can vary in the extent to which they aim to entertain users (e.g., by providing many or only a few pictures or videos), and can contain many or only few engagement triggers (e.g., invitations to share content to reply to a question in a post, etc.). Below, we will discuss in more detail the information, entertainment, and engagement value in the context of DMO's social media marketing communication for sports tourism.

**Information value of social media posts.** One of the principal motives for using social media is the search for information (Arora & Ahuja, 2021). Sports tourists are especially interested in specific information about available sports activities or sports events at their travel destination, as well as information about the destination itself. In this context, social networks have become an increasingly important source of information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Social media posts can contain more or less sports-related information and more or less valuable information related to the planned trip.

**Entertainment value of social media posts.** Entertainment can strongly affect attitudes and is probably more important in the business-to-consumer than in the business-to-business market (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009). In social networks, entertainment, leisure, or hedonic gratification refers to the degree of pleasure and fun that consumers experience during media use (Gogan et al., 2018; Ha et al., 2015). The entertainment value created by social media can trigger the users' emotions, increasing satisfaction and pleasure (Gogan et al., 2018). As entertaining content of social media posts has been found to influence users' intentions to share tourism-related sponsored advertisements (Plume & Slade, 2018), the entertainment value is likely to also play a role in the context of the DMOs' social media marketing communication.

**Engagement value of social media posts.** An important purpose of social media marketing communication is engaging consumers with the company because engaged consumers generate value for companies (Kumar 2013; Kumar et al. 2010) by acting as unpaid brand ambassadors. Consumer engagement is the level of a (potential) consumer's connections and interactions with a brand (Vivek et al., 2014) and can be triggered by company posts (Demmers et al., 2020). Particularly in the field of sports tourism, DMOs need to maintain relationships with users (Pouder et al., 2018). Previous research on social media groups related to tourism and travel has shown that it is important to post engaging content and to encourage users to interact (Camilleri & Kozak, 2022).

Given the limited body of research on consumer reactions to social media marketing communication in the field of sports tourism marketing, the purpose of the study presented here is to investigate how the different characteristics (i.e., information, entertainment, and engagement value) of a DMO's social media posts on sports tourism influence potential sports tourists' social media usage and booking intentions as well as their intentions to spread positive WOM about the destination. The users' further social media usage intention is an important response variable in the context considered here because, in the hospitality sector, ongoing social media usage and intentions to share information are influenced by information, entertainment, and social factors (Hur et al., 2017). Moreover, it is important to examine the intention to book a trip to a sports tourism destination, as it has been shown that users are more likely to purchase an advertised product when they find benefits or advantages in social media advertising (Alalwan, 2018). Particularly in the tourism sector, hotel booking intentions have been shown to depend on consumer engagement and perceived brand value in social networks (Touni et al., 2022). Furthermore, electronic word of mouth has become especially important for the tourism sector (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Notably, social media platforms have a more significant potential to motivate users to spread positive WOM than other platforms (Zhou et al., 2020). While the impact of WOM on tourism has been widely discussed (Saidani et al., 2023), there is still a lack of knowledge about its antecedents (Zhou et al., 2020).

This study provides theoretical and practical contributions to the field of social media marketing communication in sports tourism. The main theoretical contribution consists of providing an in-depth understanding of the impact of different characteristics (i.e., information, entertainment, and engagement value) of a DMO's social media posts on sports tourism. The main practical contribution is to provide DMOs with a strategic idea of how to use social media marketing communication in a more sophisticated and efficient way than they might have done before to promote sports tourism.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 Previous research

The development of information and communication technologies has affected marketing in all fields. Digital marketing is a contemporary way of interacting with customers, not just a new marketing channel (Durai & King, 2019). Social network users have been shown to ascribe a specific information value to social media, and the users' perceptions of this value depend on the structure of the social network environment and the users' level of knowledge (Sohn, 2014). The emergence of multidirectional social media and user-generated content has changed touristic behaviour and affects tourists' visit intentions, their expectations, and their satisfaction (Bigne et al., 2019; Mendes-Filho et al., 2018; Narangajavana Kaosiri et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). For DMOs, the Internet, particularly social media, have become important digital marketing tools and major channels for information dissemination (Morrison, 2018). DMOs can use social networks to interact with users to gain insights into their needs and to be able to segment and personalize their communication strategies according to these needs (Paniagua & Huertas, 2018). Images of tourism destinations posted on social networks can positively affect consumer engagement and consumer involvement (Abbasi et al., 2023). In addition to social media popularity, the discourse logic, and the argument frame (Eslami et al., 2022), relationships with social media users are important drivers of customer relationships, particularly in the field of tourism (Abbasi et al., 2023). Also in sports tourism, social media marketing has recently gained considerable importance (Yamashita, 2022) and proven its strategic potential to leverage competitive advantages in the tourism sector (Leung et al., 2013). However, social media usage needs to be better applied to the field of sports to exploit its full potential for relationship

marketing (Achen, 2023). Furthermore, researchers have widely discussed that social media plays a crucial role in the value creation process and the tourism sector (Rather, 2021; Sigala, 2016; Willems et al., 2019) and stated that there is a need for future research on the role of social media in the fields of tourism and hospitality (Leung et al., 2017).

## 1.2 Effects of social media post characteristics on consumers' engagement, booking, and WOM intentions

We use the "uses and gratifications" theory (UGT, Katz et al., 1973) as the theoretical basis for developing our hypotheses. This theory aims to explain why people feel the need to use certain media types and describes the gratifications they get from this usage. UGT is based on the general assumption that consumers actively choose their preferred media, are goal-oriented, and try to obtain gratifications from this media use (Katz et al., 1973). Media offer different uses and gratifications and consumers seek specific gratifications to fulfil their needs (Katz et al., 1973). UGT has been widely used in the context of traditional media, but some researchers (e.g., Bawack et al., 2023; Falgoust et al., 2022; Ifinedo, 2016; Kim et al., 2021; Whiting & Williams 2013, Zadeh et al. 2023) apply it to social media. Bawack et al. (2023) apply UGT to the field of social media live streams and show that these are used to satisfy users' needs for purposive value, social identification, and media attributes such as interaction control, human-message interaction, and avoidance of invasiveness. Falgoust et al. (2022) use UGT to identify six motivational categories for using TikTok. Zadeh et al. (2023) use UGT as a theoretical basis to examine co-creation intentions in social networks and show that these intentions are directly influenced by extrinsic motivational values and indirectly by intrinsic motivational values and attitudes. Ifinedo (2016) demonstrates that the gratifications of self-discovery, entertainment, social enhancement, and the need to maintain interpersonal connectivity impact students' willingness to adopt social media. Kim et al. (2021) used the UGT approach to explore event-related social media content. They found that the gratification factors influenced the event attendees' intention to share information, perceived information trust, and their intention to attend an event. According to Whiting & Williams (2013), the application of UGT to social media leads to identifying ten uses and gratifications aspects (i.e., information seeking, information sharing, convenience, entertainment, passing time, relaxation, expression of opinion, communication facilitation, social interaction, and knowledge about others). The first three aspects identified by Whiting and Williams (2013) represent facets of the information value we are interested in, the next three aspects are facets of the entertainment value, and the last four are facets of the engagement value. In the context of social network games, Li et al. (2015) found that three types of gratifications (utilitarian, hedonic, and social gratifications) influence the users' intentions to continue with the social network game. These three types identified for the slightly different context of social network games also correspond well to the information, entertainment, and engagement value we examine for DMO's social media posts on sports tourism. The gratifications that social media users receive in terms of information, entertainment, or social interaction can influence their engagement in a sports context (Ahiabor et al., 2023; Krzyżowski & Strzelecki, 2023) as well as their relationship with a brand (Fan et al., 2023; Lou et al., 2021). Thus, by applying the uses and gratifications theory to our research context and drawing on previous findings in similar fields, we argue that social network users interested in sports travel use social networks to receive gratification in the form of information about sports tourism destinations, of being entertained and of being motivated to further engage with the DMO. The intentions to further use social media to plan a sports trip are likely to depend on all three dimensions because information about sports travel destinations is essential and entertainment and engagement are two core characteristics associated with social networks. Thus, only if all three aspects are addressed in DMO's social media posts will users be motivated to rely on such posts for planning their future sports trips. These arguments lead to our first hypothesis:

H1: The higher the information, entertainment, and engagement value of a DMO's social media post on sports tourism, the higher the users' social media usage intentions will be.

The gratification received from detailed information about a sports travel destination on social networks is also likely to positively affect booking and WOM intentions as we explain in the following. As the information value of the content affects social media users' behaviour (Herrero Crespo et al., 2015), the intention to book a vacation might increase with the amount of helpful information that is available about a destination because more information facilitates and supports the booking decision by reducing the purchase risk. This promoting and supporting function of a DMO's information value is likely to trigger the activation needed for a consumer reaction to occur in the form of visiting intention behaviour (Song & Wen, 2021). In addition, social media posts with high information value provide content that is valuable to the visitors of a DMO's social media site, but that might also be interesting for friends of these users. Thus, a high information value of a DMO's posts is likely to motivate the users to spread positive word of mouth.

Moreover, gratification in the form of being invited and motivated to continue being active on the DMO's social network site is likely to positively affect booking and WOM intentions. Engagement with social media content was demonstrated to affect the attitude towards a brand and the booking intention (Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2022). Continued interaction with a DMO on its social network site ideally generates new pieces of valuable information for social network users, further supporting their decision-making process and motivating them to book a trip to the considered destination. In addition, ongoing and qualitative posting of a DMO results in greater social network user engagement (Lee et al., 2021) and, thus, in higher intentions to spread positive WOM.

On the contrary, the entertainment value generated by a DMO's posts is a different type of gratification. When reading the DMO's posts related to the sports destination they are interested in, users personally enjoy the entertainment value. However, as the entertainment value generally has no further effects on consumption behaviour (Dolan et al., 2016), it is unlikely to further affect the users' booking intentions. If social network users visit a DMO's social media site and plan, based on the posts they have read there, to book a sports trip, their booking intentions are likely to depend on the information that they find about the destination as well as added value that they get from engaging with the DMO, thus rather on the cognitive image, an effective communication, and the engagement with the online content (Kharouf et al., 2020; Molinillo et al., 2017). However, as a booking decision is important and risky, it is unlikely that such a decision is driven by the entertainment value that users experience. Moreover, the entertainment value is likely to have effects in the situation when the network user is on the DMO's social media site, but it is unlikely that such entertainment triggers the social network users' intentions to spread WOM, as rational appeals have a higher impact than emotional ones (Dolan et al., 2019). These arguments lead to our second hypothesis:

H2: The higher the information and engagement value of a DMO's social media post on sports tourism, the higher the users' booking and WOM intentions will be. However, the entertainment value does not affect these two variables.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Study context and manipulations

To examine the effects of the information value (limited vs. extensive information provided), the entertainment value (low vs. high), and the engagement value (low vs. high) on future social media usage, booking, and WOM intentions of consumers who are interested in sports travel, we created fictitious Instagram posts on sports tourism in Alicante in Spain. We used Instagram because this social network has become popular in the field of (sports) tourism, has proven to be a valuable tool to engage users (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018), and has not been given much attention in sports marketing research so far (Zeren et al., 2022). We chose the Spanish city of Alicante as a sports tourism destination. The area of Alicante, located in the south of the Valencian community, is characterized by a Mediterranean climate and an infrastructure that facilitates the promotion as "Alicante Sports Destination" by its association for sports tourism (Asociación de Turismo Deportivo Costablanca). The manipulations were implemented as shown in Table 1 and systematically combined.

Table 1: **Manipulations**

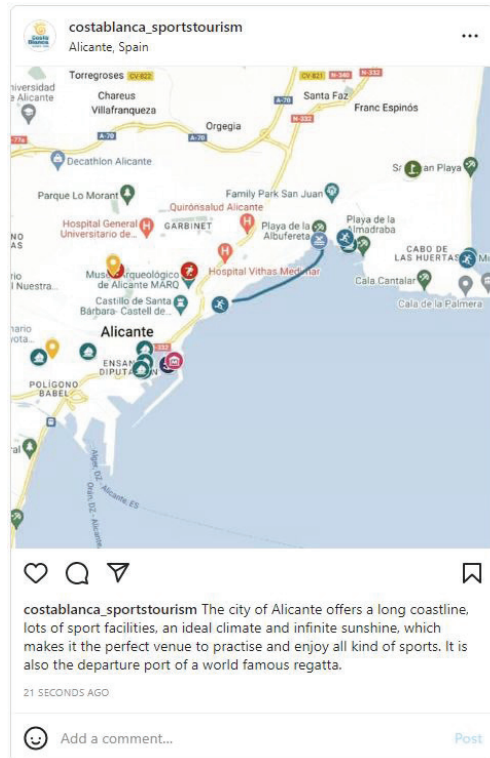
Information value	Limited information	Extensive information
	short description of Alicante as a sports tourism destination	detailed description of Alicante as a sports tourism destination, indicating various sports facilities
Entertainment value	Low	High
	1 picture of a map of the Alicante area without emojis in the description	5 pictures staging different sports activities in Alicante nicely and with several emojis in the description
Engagement value	Low	High
	no invitation to engage	includes a call to action: "...comment if you know the answer, ..., share it with your friends and follow us ..."

### 2.2 Pretest

As preliminary checks had shown that our initial manipulations of the information, entertainment, and engagement value in the fictitious post might not sufficiently reflect the intended manipulations, we slightly revised our posts and then conducted a pretest with 31 respondents to check whether our manipulations worked as intended. Each respondent was faced with one post variant and asked to rate three items for each of the three manipulations (7-point rating scales from 1= "totally disagree" to 7= "totally agree"). The information value ("this post is a good source of information", "this post supplies relevant information about sports tourism in Alicante", "this post provides detailed information about Alicante as a sports destination",  $\alpha=.902$ ) and the entertainment value ("this post is enjoyable", "this post is pleasing", "this post is entertaining",  $\alpha=.971$ ) were adapted from Hausman and Siekpe (2009). As we did not find any proposition in previous research of how to measure a social media post's engagement value, we used three self-developed items that measured slightly different facets of engagement intentions as directly as possible ("this social media post is engaging", "this post invites for further interaction", "this post motivates me to directly reply";  $\alpha = 0.913$ ). The respective items were averaged per post characteristic. The pretest results based on independent samples t-test with IBM SPSS show clear mean value differences for all three characteristics in the intended directions (information value:  $M_{\text{limited}}=3.40$  vs.  $M_{\text{extended}}=4.85$ ,  $t=-2.776$ ,  $p<.05$ ; entertainment value:  $M_{\text{low}}=3.09$  vs.  $M_{\text{high}}=5.17$ ,  $t=-3.595$ ,  $p<.01$ ; engagement value:  $M_{\text{low}}=3.04$  vs.  $M_{\text{high}}=5.07$ ,  $t=-3.832$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Two examples of the final stimulus versions are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Examples of Posts with Implemented Manipulations

**Example 1: limited degree of information, low entertainment value, low engagement value**



**Example 2: extensive degree of information, high entertainment value, high engagement value**



### 2.3 Design and procedure of the main study

The main study was based on a 2 (information provided: limited vs. extensive) x 2 (entertainment value: low vs. high) x 2 (engagement value: low vs. high) between-subjects design. The data were collected via an online questionnaire distributed through a university mailing list and on-site with paper-and-pencil questionnaires at a Swiss university.

The overall sample consisted of 214 participants (61% women, 38% men, 1% non-binary; average age: 22.8 years; age range: 17-36 years). The respondents had 17 different nationalities (most frequent: Swiss: 85.2%, German: 3.8%, French: 2.4%) and were mainly students (91%). Many of the study participants stated to use social networks regularly (several times a day: 48%, about every day: 24%, several days a week: 11%, about 1-3 days a week: 11%, less than once a week: 6%). Regarding sports activities, 30% of the respondents indicated they exercised more than five hours per week, 25% spent between three and five hours on sports activities, and 45% exercised three hours or less per week. A sample of Swiss study participants is appropriate in the context of sports tourism because many people in Switzerland are very interested in sports activities and events (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2022), and Swiss consumers love travelling, also to the southern part of Europe.

We measured all variables on 7-point rating scales (1 = "totally disagree" to 7 = "totally agree"). To operationalize booking intentions ("I am encouraged to book my sports holidays at this destination", "I will likely book my sports holidays at this destination", "I plan to book my sports holidays at this destination";  $\alpha = 0.797$ ) and social media usage intentions ("I am likely to return to the social network site of the tourism organisation of Alicante in the future", "I think this page is worth to follow";  $r = 0.543$ ), we adapted measures proposed by Hausman and Siekpe (2009) and Luo et al. (2011). We measured the intentions to spread WOM ("I would recommend this holiday destination to my friends/followers in social networks", "if any of my friends/followers were to search for a sports tourism destination, I would recommend this one",  $r = 0.617$ ) by following the suggestions of Algesheimer et al. (2005). The respondents' perceptions of the test posts' information, entertainment, and engagement value were operationalized as described for the pretest (information value:  $\alpha = 0.787$ ; entertainment value:  $\alpha = 0.918$ ; engagement value:  $\alpha = 0.810$ ). All analyses presented here were conducted with IBM SPSS.

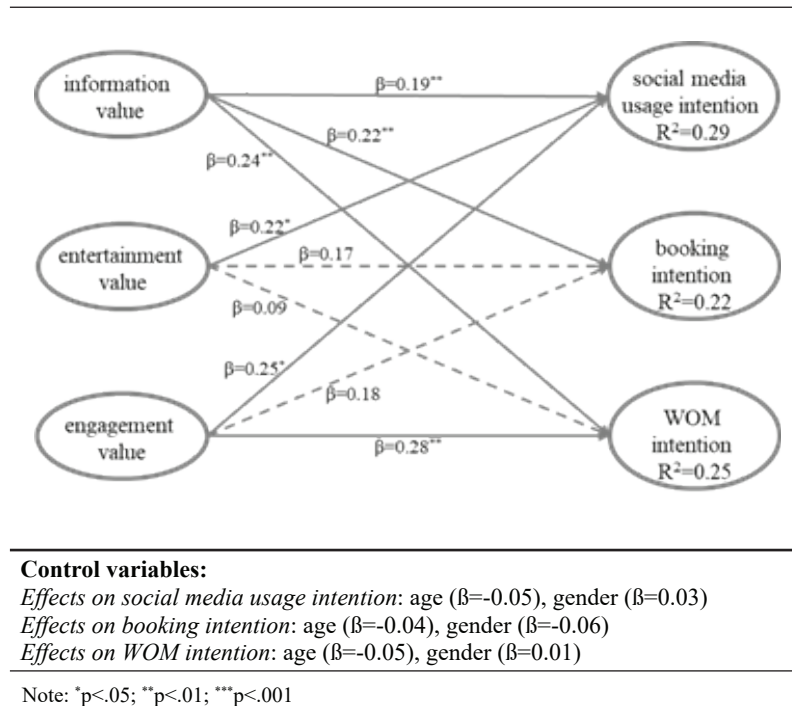
The procedure of the data collection was as follows. The respondents were first faced with a filter question asking the participants if they would generally be interested in sports trips to Alicante/Spain (either in the form of sports activities or in the form of attending sports events). Participants not interested in sports travel did not receive the main part of the questionnaire and were thus not considered in the study. The remaining participants read a brief introductory text explaining the general idea of the

survey and the main concepts. Afterwards, they saw one out of the eight test posts and then had to rate their social media usage, booking, and WOM intentions and judge the posts' information, entertainment, and engagement value. Finally, they had to complete sociodemographic questions.

### 3. RESULTS

We used SmartPLS 4 (PLS-SEM, Ringle et al., 2022) to examine whether and how a social media post's information, entertainment, and engagement value drive consumers' intentions to further engage with the DMO in the social network as well as their intentions to book a vacation in this region, and to spread positive WOM about the destination for sports vacations. We used gender and age as control variables. Figure 2 gives an overview of the results.

**Figure 2: Effects of a Post's Information, Entertainment, and Engagement Value on Social Media Usage, Booking, and WOM Intentions**



The results show that information, entertainment, and engagement value all drive social media usage intentions. Thus, a DMO's social media posts related to sports tourism need to provide detailed information about sports activities at the destination and include entertaining and engaging aspects related to sports activities to trigger the social network users' intentions to continue engaging with the DMO in the social network. Interestingly, booking intentions only depend on a post's information value while entertainment and engagement value do not seem to matter. Thus, the more information about sports activities in the destination is provided in social media posts, the higher the social media users' intentions to book a trip to the destination. Intentions to spread positive WOM about the sports vacation destination are driven by the information and the engagement value of the tourism organisation's social media post but the post's entertainment value has no effect. Thus, social media users are more motivated to spread positive WOM about a destination when they find detailed information about sports activities in the destination on social networks and when the related posts motivate them to engage on social media. These results provide full support for H1 and partial support for H2 (contrarily to H2's assumption, booking intentions are not driven by a post's engagement value).

### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

#### 4.1 Discussion of the results and major insights

Our study was built on UGT to examine and explain how DMO's social media posts affect sports tourists' intentions to further use social media, book a trip to a specific sports destination, and spread positive WOM about this destination. More precisely, applying UGT to the new context of sports tourism led us to assume that social media usage for planning sports trips provides sports travellers with different gratifications in terms of information, entertainment, and engagement value that might differently affect their reactions. We tested the so-developed hypotheses in a new empirical study that responds to the call for broadening the research on the effects of social media marketing in the field of sports management (Prado-Gasco et al., 2017; Achen, 2023).

Our results demonstrate that *social media usage intentions* are higher if a social media post provides gratifications in terms of detailed information about a sports travel destination, a high level of entertainment (e.g., by showing many pictures of the sports tourism destination) and strong engagement incentives (e.g., by launching a quiz about a sports travel destination). These insights provided by our study on sports tourism are in line with and at the same time go beyond previous findings that are usually more general (e.g., that information-seeking and entertainment positively affect continued social media use (Hur et al., 2017), that informative and entertaining content motivates social media users to interact and engage with posts (Lee et al., 2018), that interactive and vivid content positively affects user interaction in the hospitality industry (Aydin, 2020), or that promotional incentives combined with information in social media posts more likely engage users (Fan et al., 2023)). Moreover, applying UGT to a slightly different context, Li et al. (2015) found that different gratifications affect the intention to continue playing social network games. We add to this previous finding by showing that all three types of gratifications considered in our study are needed to increase further social media usage intentions.

Furthermore, we found that *intentions to book a trip to a sports destination* increase with gratifications gained from the detailed information provided by a DMO's post but are not affected by a post's entertainment and engagement value. This finding offers valuable and new insights into the role that detailed information on social networks plays in driving consumers' intentions to book sports trips and is also in line with previous findings in slightly different contexts (e.g. that informative posts led to higher engagement in a pre-consumption stage while entertaining posts engaged more in a post-consumption stage (Demmers et al., 2020)).

Moreover, our findings show that *intentions to spread positive WOM* about a sports travel destination are higher after contact with DMO posts providing gratifications in terms of more detailed information about the destination and strong engagement incentives. However, WOM intentions do not depend on the post's entertainment value. These findings are new for the field of sports travel and in line with previous findings in slightly different fields (e.g., that online content engagement positively affects users' future behavioural intentions towards a sports event (Kharouf et al., 2020) or that content attractiveness and engagement value influence intentions to revisit a social network (Camilleri & Kozak, 2022)).

#### 4.2 Theoretical and practical contributions

From a theoretical perspective, our application of UGT to the context of sports tourism and the empirical testing of arguments derived from UGT advance the theoretical understanding of social media marketing communication for sports tourism destinations. This new application of UGT goes beyond previous applications of this theory to the field of tourism (e.g., Chavez et al., 2020; Chung & Jeong, 2024) by focusing on the particular sector of sports tourism and considering the very narrow segment of sports tourists with their specific needs. Thus, our findings related to sports tourism extend broader research on DMO's social media marketing communications by considering a particular type of tourism for which research on the effects of social media marketing communication and engagement remains limited (Einsle et al., 2023). More specifically, our study contributes to a better understanding of how different types of gratifications provided by a DMO's social media posts drive sports tourists' intentions to further engage with the DMO in the social network as well as their booking and WOM intentions. Our findings provide a deep understanding of the varying relevance of different types of gratifications depending on the type of consumer reaction considered. While DMO's posts related to sports trips need to provide gratification in terms of detailed information in any case, additional engagement incentives are only needed when further social media usage intentions and WOM intentions are targeted. Gratification in terms of entertainment value is mainly important when the focus of social media communication is on triggering further social media usage but plays no role in triggering behavioural reactions beyond the social network. The fact that tourists intensively use social media for travel purposes but that, at the same time, research is limited, further underlines the significant contribution of these insights generated by our study.

In addition to these theoretical contributions, our study also provides interesting implications for sports tourism DMOs enabling them to enhance their social media marketing communication strategies and to use social media communication more efficiently to market their sports tourism destinations. Depending on their main communication objectives, DMOs should use different strategies for their social media posts. If the focus is on generating high intentions of sports tourists to further use social media to plan their sports trips, DMO's posts should provide three different types of gratifications: fresh, intriguing, and unique information about the sports destination (e.g. insider information about various sports events), great entertainment (e.g. nice and absorbing pictures and videos about sports activities, entertaining emojis integrated into the posts, etc.), and strong incentives for further social media engagement (e.g., quiz questions and prizes for interactive social media users that can be redeemed for future trips to the sports destination). DMOs that mainly aim to increase booking intentions directly need to provide interesting and helpful information about the sports travel destination in their posts. If a DMO's main objective is to increase awareness about the travel destination through social network users' WOM, DMOs should provide rich information value with their posts and also increase engagement value. Thus, our findings help DMOs to optimize their social media marketing strategies according to their objectives.

### 4.3 Limitations and future research

As with all studies, this study has some limitations that open perspectives for future research. First of all, our data were collected in Switzerland and the respondents were mainly students, which might limit the generalizability of the results. Although students are highly active social network users, often sportive and interested in sports travel, future studies should replicate the effects using broader samples from different countries to increase the generalizability of our results. Moreover, we examined the effects of interest for one specific social network. Future research might consider other social networks to see whether the results hold for different types of social networks. Furthermore, in this study, we only tested posts related to one sports tourism destination in Spain. Thus, our results need to be validated for other sports tourism destinations in different countries. In addition, to limit the duration of the study participation, we tested only one post. Future studies could use an experimental setting where social network users read through several posts as they would do in real life before booking a sports trip. Finally, it might be interesting to use a longitudinal approach to compare data before, during and after travelling to a sports destination to develop a better understanding of sports tourists' reactions to DMO's social media communications in different stages of their consumer journey.

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