

The future of sports tourism in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic – Developing a new paradigm model

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Abstract

Purpose – Sports tourism was strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is no consensus on what sports tourism should look like in the post-pandemic period. This study explores the future of sports tourism in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and provides an alternative paradigm model.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected by interviewing sports tourism experts. Data analysis was based on the continuous comparison method during three stages of open, axial and selective coding.

Findings – The findings point to the complexity of the future sports tourism industry. Post-COVID-19 sports tourism strongly depends on environmental forces and targeted support, with strategies focused on tourists' safety and security, digitalization of the industry, and new employment opportunities.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the body of knowledge on sports tourism by providing answers to the current challenges, threats and opportunities associated with the pandemic. The proposed paradigm model could be a guideline for sports tourism practitioners and policymakers to accelerate recovery from COVID-19 in a sustainable and resilient manner.

Keywords Sports tourism, COVID-19 pandemic, Tourism crisis, Planning, Electronic and virtual tourism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a striking health crisis with an outstanding impact all over the world (Ferreira *et al.*, 2020; Goffman, 2020; Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Matiza, 2020). Economies were brought to a standstill and many people lost their jobs. During the last three years, governments have implemented different strategies to fight COVID-19. Besides vaccines and supplemented non-pharmaceutical health measures, people's movement was restricted, while business and personal communication were transferred to the virtual world. This had an extremely negative effect on service industries that are based on tourists' co-creation and the personal contact between a service provider and a customer (Assiouras *et al.*, 2019; Lapointe, 2020; Perić and Vitezić, 2021; Sobaih *et al.*, 2021; Stienmetz *et al.*, 2021). The tourism industry was no exemption and international tourism recorded a 73% decline in tourists and a loss of about USD 1 trillion in export revenues in 2020 (WTO, 2021).

The scale of the pandemic has prompted tourism academics to consider the future, that is, the tourism industry in the post-COVID-19 period. It is expected that the number of tourists will increase after the pandemic (Abdullah, 2021; Miao *et al.*, 2022), but travel behaviors and the intensity of recovery will depend on tourists' perceptions of risk and fear of travel (Duong *et al.*, 2022; Isaac and Keijzer, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Yet, the restart and full recovery of the tourism industry is not only about tourism numbers (Jeyacheya and Hampton, 2022; Lu *et al.*, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). There is no consensus, however, on what tourism should look like in the post-pandemic period. Many saw the COVID-19 pandemic as a trigger to change the existing

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business model and restart tourism in a more sustainable and resilient way that would prioritize local and domestic instead of international, highlight pro-environmental behavior of tourists and promote sustainable tourism practices (Cave and Dredge, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles *et al.*, 2022; Sheldon, 2020; Vu *et al.*, 2022). A wide range of practical measures are being considered within a tourism value chain to stimulate tourism demand and facilitate destinations' capacity to meet post-pandemic tourist expectations (Dias *et al.*, 2022; Huynh *et al.*, 2022; Seyitoğlu and Costa, 2022).

This discussion can be translated to sports tourism, which is one of the most important areas of tourism and a source of huge income for its stakeholders. However, as sports tourism is strongly based on events, and events were brought to an abrupt halt, it suffered a lot during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cohen *et al.*, 2020; Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Parnell *et al.*, 2022). Both amateur and professional events, whether small-scale or mega events like the Olympics, were postponed or cancelled (Borovcanin *et al.*, 2020; Cooper and Alderman, 2020; Toresdahl and Asif, 2020). In the first stage, event organizers had to adapt to the New Normal. Events resumed according to the COVID-19 protocol that introduced the implementation of selected non-pharmaceutical protective measures (e.g. temperature checks and limited attendance) (Geisler *et al.*, 2022; Ludvigsen and Hayton, 2022; Perić *et al.*, 2021). Without spectators or with a limited number of spectators, the event experience has significantly changed, however (DiFiori *et al.*, 2021). Several studies have focused on tourists' intentions showing that people have been eagerly waiting to return to sport and tourism participation, whether actively or passively (Hemmonsby *et al.*, 2021; Chersulich Tomino and Perić, 2022). This seems to lead to a business-as-usual (BAU) scenario in the post-pandemic period. On the other hand, conceptual studies have offered different perspectives with new research agendas (Daniels and Tichaawa, 2021; Miles and Shipway, 2020) or the transformation of existing sports tourism practices into novel and co-created solutions shifting tourism values and philosophy (Stevens, 2021).

Therefore, as in tourism in general, it is a matter of debate whether post-COVID-19 sports tourism should strive for a quick recovery and BAU scenario, or whether it should seek different, more sustainable business models. Specifically, based on these considerations, the following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1. How would the post-COVID-19 sports tourism industry look like?
- RQ2. What are the key determinants of a successful post-COVID-19 sports tourism business?
- RQ3. What are the main challenges/threats that the sports tourism industry will face after COVID-19?
- RQ4. What are the main opportunities that the sports tourism industry will face after COVID-19?

In an attempt to answer the above questions, we conducted an empirical study of sports tourism experts to find out how they perceive the future of the sports tourism industry. This qualitative study explores the future of sports tourism in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and provides an alternative paradigm model. It is guided by the known effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the lesser-known strategies that organizers and policymakers are undertaking in response to what lies ahead. By assessing the obstacles and opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic offers for the future development of sports tourism, the proposed paradigm model could be a guideline for sports tourism practitioners and policymakers to accelerate recovery from COVID-19 in a sustainable and resilient manner.

This paper now turns to present the research methodology. The next sections will then present and discuss the main findings. The paper finishes with some concluding remarks, highlighting the theoretical and practical implications and future research streams.

Method

To better understand the post-COVID-19 pandemic sports tourism industry, the authors employed semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Therefore, this research is of a

qualitative type and uses the Grounded Theory (GT) research method. GT is a well-known method used in many research studies (Chun Tie *et al.*, 2019). GT is one of the inductive and exploratory methods that is rooted in reality and provides explanations for events as they occur. According to Corbin and Strauss, “GTs, because they are drawn from the data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Given the differences and subjectivity associated with qualitative research methods, researchers need to explain the process of how a theory is developed (Chiovitti and Piran, 2003). The promise of theory and model development makes GT an attractive methodology to follow. However, it has been argued that many researchers fall short and provide a detailed description of only the research area or simply a quantitative content analysis rather than an explanatory model (Bringer *et al.*, 2006). Given the lack of theorizing previous COVID-19 post-pandemic sports tourism industry studies, GT is well suited to such an undertaking.

Data collection and sample

An understanding of the multiple perspectives related to the sports tourism industry in the post-pandemic era was regarded as of critical importance for the data. The authors were looking for informants with a wide knowledge of sports tourism because of their ability to understand the research problem and central phenomenon (Creswell and Clark, 2017). The informants were expected to be researchers and teachers of sports tourism and to have published multiple papers (at least five papers with Journal Citation Reports (JCR) index)/book chapters/books on sports tourism. Therefore, this study used a purposive sampling and the initial screening determined the eligibility of each participant for this study. In the first stage of recruiting respondents, an extensive database of contacts was created. Then the interviewees from the list were invited, taking care to include scientists from different countries, different ages and both sexes. The initial contact was made by email and social networks between June and August 2022 explaining the purpose of the study. Participants were guaranteed the confidentiality of their data and personal information. Since there were practical limitations in terms of available funding and the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to travel physically to meet respondents (face to face) from other parts of the world. Therefore, after the respondents’ consent to participate in the study, they were asked whether they prefer to arrange an online meeting or answer to an email. For those who have chosen email, an email with a short introductory explanation and four questions that coincide with the research questions of this study (RQ1–4) was sent to them. After three days, a gentle reminder was sent to those who did not respond. On average, respondents provided answers within four days. On the other hand, each interview began with brief introductory explanations by the interviewer as an icebreaker. Then the respondents were asked four questions that coincide with the research questions of this study (RQ1–4). Online interviews approximately ranged from 20 to 75 min. These procedures were continued until a new idea was obtained, meaning that theoretical sufficiency or theoretical saturation had occurred. It should be noted that repetition of codes was observed from the ninth interview onward; however, the data collection process continued until the last interview was conducted to ensure complete theoretical saturation.

Finally, 13 academics were interviewed, each with more than seven years of experience and sufficient knowledge about sports tourism (see Table 1). It should be noted that repetition of codes was observed from the ninth interview onward; however, the data collection process continued until the last interview was conducted to ensure complete theoretical saturation (Thomson, 2010). The respondents are residents of nine different countries. Six of these countries (i.e. Australia, Iran, France, Italy, Turkey and the USA) are large countries and sports superpowers. The other three (Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia) are rather small countries, but belong to among the most successful nations when the number of Olympic medals is expressed in relative terms, that is, the number of medals per population or weighted medals per Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (<https://olympics.com>). Additionally, all of these countries are globally recognized tourist destinations (<https://unwto.org>). In particular, they have specific geographical, historical and cultural conditions as well as the necessary natural potential to attract sports tourists. Therefore, living in countries successful in

Table 1 Characteristics of the interviewees

Row	Sex	Age	Education	Job/post	Country
1	Male	31	PhD	Academic staff	Serbia
2	Male	39	PhD	Academic staff	Slovenia
3	Male	52	PhD	Academic staff	USA
4	Female	47	PhD	Academic staff	USA
5	Female	43	PhD	Academic staff	Croatia
6	Male	38	PhD	Academic staff	Turkey
7	Female	41	PhD	Academic staff	Turkey
8	Male	55	PhD	Academic staff	Italy
9	Female	39	PhD	Academic staff	France
10	Female	43	PhD	Academic staff	Iran
11	Male	55	PhD	Academic staff	Iran
12	Male	52	PhD	Academic staff	Australia
13	Female	48	PhD	Academic staff	Australia

Source(s): Table developed by authors

sports and sports tourism, all respondents were familiar with all the main determinants, challenges and opportunities for the sports tourism industry in the post-pandemic period and could answer the proposed research questions.

Data analysis

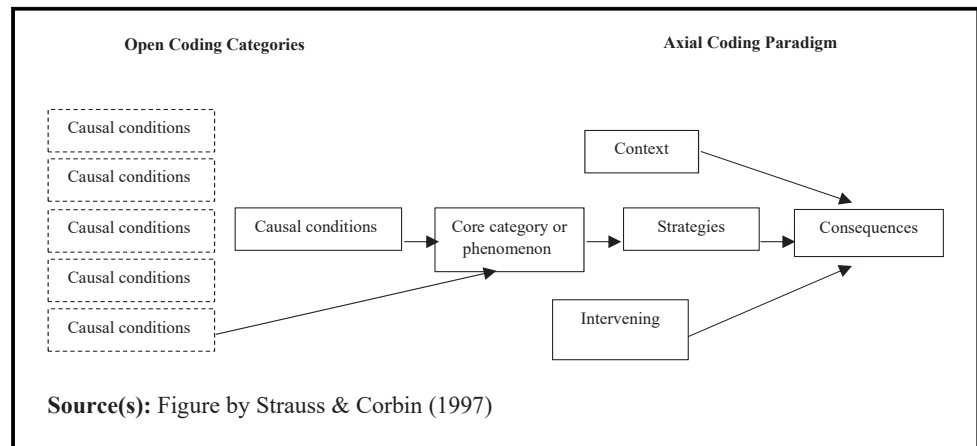
Analysis was undertaken concurrently with the data collection process. Coding is the most important element in the process of analyzing the data obtained from interviews. Coding involves carefully reading the data and turning it into the smallest possible component. The codes are the result of microscopic analysis of the data. After the text files of the interviews were completed and accurately transcribed by the authors, each transcript was coded independently by the authors. Consistent with [Corbin and Strauss' \(2008\)](#) systematic approach, three types of coding – open, axial and selective – enumerated the first- and second-level categories and their relationships.

Open coding is the first step in analyzing interviews in the GT method. This stage is called open because the researcher extracts the code and builds the categories with an open mind and without any restrictions on the number of codes and categories ([Woods, 2003](#)). Open coding involves a process. It is an analysis through which concepts are first discovered in data and are then compared and classified as categories to identify similar phenomena. Thus, open coding can be said to include data shredding, comparison, conceptualization and categorization.

Axial coding is the second stage of GT. It links groups to their subgroups. At this stage, the researcher selects one of the categories as the central category and explores it as the central phenomenon and determines its relationship with the other categories ([Corbin and Strauss, 2008](#)). Charmaz and other critics contend that axial coding may be considered an optional phase of the constant comparative method ([Charmaz, 2006](#)). At this point, the data that was divided in the open coding process is reassembled to provide a more accurate explanation of the phenomenon (see [Figure 1](#)). For this purpose, categories and relationships between them are classified using the axial coding model in the form of axial phenomena or core category, causal conditions (i.e. categories that precede and influence the central phenomenon), strategies (i.e. actions or interactions that are applied to manage the central phenomenon), contextual and intervening conditions (i.e. the general context that influences or facilitates or constrains strategies), and consequences (i.e. the result of these actions and interactions) ([Corbin and Strauss, 2008](#)).

The third stage of coding consists of selective coding and presentation of the research paradigm model. It is the process of integrating and improving categories to form a theory. Selective coding relates the categories and presents those relationships within the framework of a narrative and corrects those categories that need further improvement and development ([Corbin and Strauss,](#)

Figure 1 Paradigm examples in axial coding



2008). At this stage, the researcher, depending on her/his understanding of the text of the phenomenon under study, either presents the framework of the paradigm model in the form of a narrative or breaks down the paradigm model and graphically presents the final theory. Paradigm model design is one of the most important strategies of qualitative research method, especially database theorizing (Charmaz, 2006). Data integration is very important in fundamental theorizing (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The process of theory integration and improvement in selective coding is done through techniques such as storyline writing that connects concepts and the process of categorization through personal notes about theoretical ideas. In fact, at this stage, the researcher selects the central category, with other categories revolving around it and forming a whole, in a methodical way. By connecting with other categories, the researcher proceeds to write the theory, which is a final explanation that is developed in an abstract way.

Classifications were performed based on code refinement, duplicate code removal and comparison of embryonic codes with previously obtained codes. Systematic analysis was performed using MAXQDA statistical software (version 12) for data analysis and classification.

Finally, initiatives were undertaken to ensure the rigor of the analysis. Members of the research team discussed the data and themes, and their interpretations (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Cohen's kappa coefficient (k) was used to establish sufficient inter-rater reliability.

Results

Open coding

In the open coding stage, 166 codes were extracted from 13 detailed interviews with tourism and sports tourism experts. After removing duplicates and insignificant codes, 130 more abstract concepts remained and 25 categories were identified. The results of this step include the formation of basic concepts and the categories derived from them using Table 2.

Validity and reliability of data

In this research, to check validity, the findings of the research were presented to the participants, using Table 3. They studied the text of the theory, and their views were applied. In the end, this research was studied and reviewed by the professors, based on whose comments modifications or changes were made to the final theory. The Re-test Reliability method was used to measure reliability. As shown in Table 3, the total number of codes in a 30-day interval is 190, the number of agreements is 74 and the number of nonagreements is 28. The retest reliability of the interviews

Table 2 Secondary axial codes and indicators

Themes/concept	Categories	Dimensions
❖ Ensuring the health of sports tourists ❖ Health control of business environments ❖ Expanding indoor spaces to comply with social distancing ❖ Increased health sensitivities ❖ Vaccination and presentation of health card ❖ Increasing demand and need for active life and spending leisure time	Paying more attention to health	Post-COVID-19 pandemic opportunities
❖ Increase communication between tourists ❖ Tourism boom with the convergence of tourism activists ❖ Innovation in the field of tourism ❖ Increasing and creating sightseeing places and tourist destinations ❖ Providing services throughout the year ❖ Government support ❖ New destinations can have an opportunity to increase regional presence	Social connections of tourists to achieve their satisfaction Creating destinations for sports tourism	
❖ Re-holding festivals and international tourism meetings ❖ Training and strengthening the culture of hospitality after post-COVID-19 ❖ Strengthening travel tours to attract tourists ❖ Making tourists aware and confident about tourist destinations ❖ Carrying out work activities through a mobile phone or laptop ❖ Less presence or high sensitivity in crowded entertainment, tourism, closed sports and resort environments ❖ Less presence or high sensitivity in choosing accommodation environments ❖ Less time spent in public places of entertainment and recreation ❖ Welcoming short-term trips	Increasing the capacity of sports tourism Promoting telework	
❖ Placement of doctors in sports facilities and residences ❖ Improving the amount of standard health, welfare and accommodation services ❖ Increasing accommodation centers ❖ Unique design of sports facilities for sports events ❖ Placing proper ventilation system in sports facilities ❖ COVID-19 is a good opportunity to rebuild, prepare and strengthen tourism infrastructure and facilities in tourist destinations ❖ Desire to hold outdoor sports events ❖ Improving security and safety for travel ❖ Development of personal and management skills of human resources ❖ Improving and updating the quality of electronic services ❖ Information Technology (IT) readiness ❖ Increasing green travel ❖ Reducing the use of public transportation system ❖ Providing a separate transportation system for tourists ❖ Allocating special visiting time to sensitive groups such as the elderly or patients ❖ Cooperation of the World Health Organization (WHO) with institutions in charge of sports and tourism ❖ Providing travel insurance for sports tourists ❖ Flexibility and the possibility of canceling the trip ❖ Identification of risks ❖ Just a passport will not be enough ❖ Teaching health principles to sports tourists ❖ Providing necessary training to human resources ❖ Supervision of managers or special working group on the social distancing situation in sports facilities ❖ Continuous monitoring of people's health status ❖ Longer control queues (COVID-19 test, quarantine, etc.)	Actions related to sports facilities/ places Environmental empowerment Transportation system Managing risks Teaching basic principles Regulatory measures	Infrastructure facilities Management factors

(continued)

Table 2 Continued

[illegible]

Table 2 Continued

<i>Themes/concept</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>
❖ Creating a new market ❖ Government support for tourism companies ❖ Forgiveness of the rent of sports facilities ❖ Providing facilities to businesses by national and international organizations ❖ Being patient in business ❖ Agility and flexibility capacity of destinations and tourism industry	Business support	Targeted support for businesses
❖ Suspension or remission of tax payment ❖ Suspension or forgiveness of debts and bank loans ❖ Financing	Financial support	
❖ Marketing diverse cultural-sports activities ❖ Strengthen cultural pride	Cultural	Sustainable development
❖ Development of sports routes and attractions ❖ Reducing environmental issues and promoting sustainable development	Environmental	
❖ Increase employment opportunities ❖ Increasing economic transparency ❖ Increase investment ❖ Increase in income	Economical	
❖ Formation of Post-COVID-19 social control headquarters ❖ Increasing leisure facilities and infrastructure ❖ Increasing the quality of life of the community ❖ Smart life ❖ Increasing social capital (good urban governance, social cohesion and acceptance, participation, adaptation, and social prosperity)	Social	
❖ Lack of scientific certainty about the COVID-19 virus ❖ Inflation and price increases (including fuel, event tickets, transportation, etc.) ❖ Absence of intelligent integrated system ❖ Lack of long-term goals in different sectors ❖ Neglecting education and orientation with the aim of improving the quality characteristics of domestic tourists ❖ Lack of intelligent and purposeful choice of foreign tourists ❖ Black market and brokerage ❖ Global recession ❖ Political instability ❖ Mass sports events (indoor and outdoor) will face a slight slowdown	Tourism syndrome	Post-COVID-19 challenges
❖ Changing the behavior pattern of tourists ❖ Regaining the trust of tourists ❖ Double attention to health ❖ Change in the pattern of tourism destinations ❖ Digitalization of tourism ❖ Environmentally friendly mechanisms	Changing the attitude of tourists	Post-COVID-19 strategy
Source(s): Table developed by authors		

Table 3 Test reliability results

<i>Row</i>	<i>Interview number</i>	<i>Total number of codes</i>	<i>Number of agreements</i>	<i>Number of disagreements</i>	<i>Test-retest reliability</i>
1	1st	72	29	11	82%
2	2nd	69	26	9	72%
3	13th	49	19	8	80%
Total		190	74	28	78%
Source(s): Table developed by authors					

conducted in the present study is 78%, and since this value is above 60%, the reliability of the coding is confirmed.

Axial coding

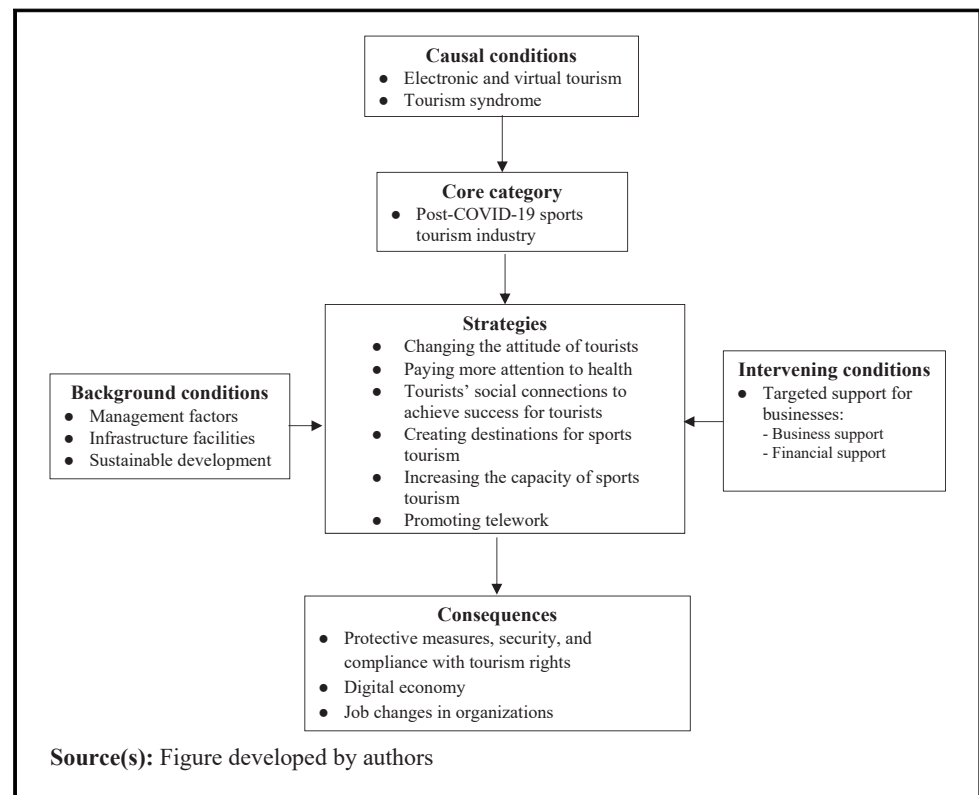
In axial coding (phase 2, 25 codes), categories are systematically refined and linked with subcategories. At this stage, the categories, characteristics and dimensions resulting from open coding are compiled to create an increasing knowledge about relationships (Lee, 2001). In this stage, researchers choose a category of the open coding stage and place it in the center of the process as a “central phenomenon”. In this case, post-COVID-19 sports tourism industry is a central phenomenon and it relates to other categories, namely causal conditions, core category, strategies, intervening conditions, background conditions and consequences.

Selective coding and theory formulation. The paradigm model (Figure 2) represents the result of the qualitative analysis. In this model, the categories identified by axial coding and open coding are displayed in the form of a systematic pattern. Selective coding is the process of integrating and improving categories (Lee, 2001; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). In this stage of coding, the foundation’s data theorist writes a theory of the relationships between the categories in the axial coding model. It shows the flow of processes and activities in the context of the study.

Discussion

For those using GT as a research method, the question of how and when to engage with the existing literature is often problematic (Dunne, 2011). With the increase in international tourism, no single academic discipline can claim the monopoly of tourism studies, and the limitations

Figure 2 Post-COVID-19 sports tourism industry paradigm model



of applying development theories only to developing societies have become increasingly apparent. Instead, what is needed is a globalization perspective that focuses on the political economy of sports tourism, and on the other hand, to include external links and internal structures, including the role of the government, transnational tourism companies and mass sports tourism, which has been little researched. Living in the challenging (post) COVID-19 period, appropriate strategies should be designed to respond to such a changing and turbulent environment. The time has come to realize the sustainability of sports tourism through various smart solutions ([Parnell et al., 2022](#); [Perić and Vitezić, 2021](#)).

The paradigm model for the sports tourism industry in a post-COVID-19 environment proposed in this study implies complexity. Therefore, the interpretation of the post-COVID-19 sports tourism industry is multilayered. At the center of the model is the post-COVID-19 sports tourism industry. It is a central phenomenon around which activities are formed. As causal conditions, electronic and virtual tourism and tourism syndrome affect the post-COVID-19 sports tourism industry and lead to its emergence. Therefore, sports tourism can be qualified in a passive framework where physical displacement is no longer a criterion. As argued by Kurtzman and Zauhar, this displacement of virtual reality is increasing and gaining popularity in sports tourism worldwide ([Kurtzman and Zauhar, 1999](#)). Virtual sports tourism is possible with the help of new technologies and is a new type of tourism that uses digital space to visit conferences, events and even places without time and place restrictions ([Regret Iyer et al., 2022](#)). It is recognized as a recovery strategy ([Daniels and Tichaawa, 2021](#)), but it can also easily continue to be used as a dominant model for post-pandemic event sports tourism ([Helsen et al., 2022](#)). Physical tourism develops and acquires the features of virtual. Indeed, virtual tourism is not at all comparable to physical tourism, but it can trigger visitation of destinations ([Lee, 2022](#)) and has benefits for tourists ([Gharibi et al., 2022](#); [Zhang et al., 2022](#); [Zhu et al., 2022](#)). For instance, people started using virtual reality technologies to get a sightseeing experience even if they could not go directly to the tourist attractions. There is no time limit for entering and exiting a tourist attraction as well as there is no cost for travel, food and accommodation. Considering all this together, the risk of the trip is reduced since there are no unforeseen problems.

On the other hand, the results of the interview suggest that the problem of COVID-19 will be resolved and the world will gradually return to normal. The most important reason for the gradual return of travel and tourism to the peak days in the post-COVID-19 period will be the emergence of the so-called sports tourism syndrome. This syndrome is a series of mental and practical health habits to deal with COVID-19 and other similar uncertainties. It includes the risks and fears of travelling in the post-pandemic period as confirmed by [Assaf et al. \(2022\)](#), [Duong et al. \(2022\)](#), [Li et al. \(2020, 2021\)](#) and [Song et al. \(2022\)](#), but also other factors as inflation, recession or political instabilities. For example, despite the optimism expressed by sports tourists about their return to sport-related activities in a short time ([Chersulich Tomino and Perić, 2022](#)), they will have to modify their behavior at sports venues even long after the virus is eradicated. Additionally, travel and tourism businesses, especially international, will experience important changes in business operations in order to adapt ([Assiouras et al., 2019](#); [Gössling et al., 2020](#); [Lapointe, 2020](#); [Perić and Vitezić, 2021](#); [Stienmetz et al., 2021](#)).

Further, findings imply that background conditions and targeted support for the businesses affect strategies and actions that deal with the post-COVID-19 sports tourism industry. Indeed, background conditions in the form of infrastructure and management factors are confirmed as constitutes for exploiting the potential of sports tourism ([Pellegrini et al., 2020](#); [Ratten, 2021](#)). The role of managerial processes, capacity building and training even increases in crisis and needs to be strengthened to provide new opportunities when crisis finishes ([Dias et al., 2022](#)). Innovation and creativity in the field of sports tourism are more important and necessary than ever before. Similarly, functional and eye-pleasing infrastructure is confirmed as a key attribute for shaping sports and sports tourism experiences ([Taylor and Sand, 2021](#)) and will remain the key actor in the future as well. All of this needs to be in balance with sustainable principles encompassing a broad spectrum of economic, sociocultural and environmental perspectives. On the other hand, business and financial

support act as facilitators in designing and implementing strategies. This is no surprise because both the individual-opportunity nexus theory (Eckhardt and Shane, 2010) and the institutional theory (Bruton *et al.*, 2010) argue that besides proactive individuals, successful businesses need a supportive environment. This is also in line with Dias *et al.* (2022) and Seyitoğlu and Costa (2022) who found business and financial support important to portray the post-pandemic tourism scenarios. Therefore, these background and intervening conditions facilitate and accelerate the implementation of strategies and act as a catalyst in a post-COVID-19 entrepreneurial ecosystem. They deal with the administration of the phenomenon (i.e. post-COVID-19 sports tourism industry) and relate to tourists' attitudes, paying more attention to health, social connections tourists establish to achieve satisfaction and success for tourists, creating destinations for sports tourism, increasing sports tourism capacities, and promoting telework. These strategies are aimed both at the psychological world of individuals and at destinations and stakeholders responsible for the development of the destination. Again, this confirms that the synergy between all stakeholders is a presumption of survival and success in the sports tourism industry (Higham, 2020; Stevens, 2021). Community engagement is of particular importance to create sustainable and resilient tourism ecosystem (Daniels and Tichaawa, 2021; Hartman *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, employing strategies should lead to some consequences. They are operational and focus on the implementation of protective measures (of different levels depending on the context), security and compliance with tourism rights, digital economy, and job changes in organizations in the post-COVID-19 sports tourism industry. Safety and security in sports tourism have never been in question because they are a "must" for sports tourism providers (Esfahani *et al.*, 2021; Perić *et al.*, 2021). These actions need to be designed and implemented equally for everyone involved, because there is no place for discrimination in tourism (Canh, 2022; Nottingham, 2022). Regarding job changes, as claimed by Stevens (2021), specific talent can sometimes be more important than formal qualification. Moreover, job changes will be the result of digitalization and new technologies. Although the tourism industry relies on services, that is, the interplay between a service provider and a guest, new business models are inevitable. This includes not only the disappearance of traditional travel agencies and the rise of online tourism agencies but also robots replacing humans in providing services (Ab Rahman *et al.*, 2022; Fusté-Forné and Ivanov, 2021). On the other hand, here we again refer to virtual tourism that uses immersive technologies (virtual, augmented, mixed reality and Metaverse) and can provide experiences of existing and nonexistent destinations (Glebova and Brasier, 2020).

Conclusion

The sports tourism industry suffered significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic (delaying the 2020 Olympics, suspension of sports leagues, stadiums without spectators, closure of sports facilities, etc.). Understanding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on sports tourism and ongoing responses is therefore critical to recovery planning. However, the sports tourism industry should go beyond the current realities and threats and focus more on the opportunities that will shape the future of the industry. The voice of academia might provide additional incentives for recovery and future success. This empirical study, therefore, examined the attitudes of sports tourism experts toward the future of the sports tourism industry and, as a result, provided an alternative paradigm model for the post-COVID-19 sports tourism industry.

The paradigm model (see Figure 2 again) shows the complexity of the sports tourism industry. The flow of processes and activities suggests that the future of sports tourism in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic is strongly dependent on environmental forces with strategies aimed at tourists' safety and security, digitalization of the industry and new job opportunities. From a theoretical perspective, the main implications of this study are set out in themes that add to the evolving theory about the COVID-19 pandemic and the sports tourism industry. This study contributes to the body of knowledge of sports tourism by positioning post-COVID-19 sports tourism within a postmodern tourism perspective (Stankov *et al.*, 2021; Zhu *et al.*, 2022). It goes beyond existing studies on the behavioral characteristics and intentions of tourists (perception of travel risks, propensity to revisit,

etc.) (Hemmonsbey *et al.*, 2021; Perić *et al.*, 2021; Chersulich Tomino and Perić, 2022) by providing answers to current challenges, threats and opportunities that shape the present and future of sports tourism. Consequently, this study complements the current studies on the future of (sport) tourism, e.g. Assaf *et al.* (2022) and Dias *et al.* (2022), and supports the risk management discipline by providing some strategies to overcome the safety problems caused by COVID-19.

From a practical point of view, this study critically discusses the salient issues in light of existing arguments from the literature and reflects implications for decision-makers. By assessing the obstacles and opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic offers for the future development of sports tourism, the proposed paradigm model could be a guideline for sports tourism practitioners and policymakers to accelerate recovery from COVID-19 in a sustainable and resilient manner. The most important strategies for promoting post-COVID-19 sports tourism business from the point of view of experts are managerial, technological, marketing, institutional and human resources solutions. More specific recommendations imply that a new type of sports tourism government is needed, which would focus on mental, psychological, social and cultural issues of tourists, the type of service/experience provided, (virtual) access to facilities, community engagement and novel promotional campaigns (e.g. based on social networks and virtual channels). Social networks are extremely important because previous studies found that individuals' reference groups shape their behaviors, attitudes and decisions (Jeon *et al.*, 2019).

Indeed, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry will face a dilemma and a challenge called virtual presence. The decades that follow might see tourists travel through the Metaverse. Choosing a destination, booking a hotel, paying a fee, travelling with friends and attending a special event such as the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup will be possible in the Metaverse. Sports tourism providers should adapt and offer not only onsite but also virtual experiences. Sports events, conferences and festivals can provide attractive and lovely gatherings by changing the way they provide services to the audience and tourists through virtual services and videoconferencing. However, for both onsite and virtual experiences, providers need to enhance tourists' safety (e.g. implementation of non-pharmaceutical health protection measures, and enhancing trust and security issues in virtual interactions) without deteriorating the overall tourism experience. In parallel, supporting and investing in the tourism and hospitality ecosystem can be considered as the most important secondary solutions to promote sports tourism businesses and introduced hospitality in the post-COVID-19 era. This means that policymakers need to establish a supportive and transparent legal environment as well as financial support for all stakeholders. In addition to norms related to issues of health, trust and safety, special attention should be paid to labor legislation due to new types of jobs that will not be tied to a specific workplace.

The main limitation of this study relates to the sample of experts. The perspective of other stakeholders such as sports tourism practitioners and sports tourists themselves might contribute to a better understanding of future sports tourism and increase the generalizability of this study's findings. Since this study used a qualitative approach, future studies may be quantitative in nature in order to define individual constructs and examine the relationships between them. Further, future studies would require additional research aimed at analyzing the well-being, health and safety of sports tourists and employees in order to see how these concepts fit within the new paradigm model. They could also investigate sports tourists' actual expectations and needs regarding sports tourism, including whether sports tourism can reduce the mental and psychological consequences of a crisis like COVID-19. This might be an additional dimension of sports tourism in the post-pandemic period. Additionally, while this study intended to provide a general guideline, there are many types of sports tourism, with different characteristics. Future studies could therefore focus on particular sports, providing more specific insights and recommendations.

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