

Development of Health Tourism Promotion: The Case of Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster

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Abstract: This paper examines the Croatian region of Kvarner as one of the most popular tourism destinations in Croatia and the way in which health tourism contributes to a better image of the destination. The promotional activities of health tourism are examined from a communication and economic perspective. Using the example of the Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster, authors are examining which promotional tools the cluster uses to popularize health tourism in Kvarner, but also how the organizations that belong to the cluster contribute to the destination attractiveness. The Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster was chosen as a case for the analysis as it enjoys a high status and recognition in the international environment, which is confirmed by the fact that it is a multiple finalist and winner of the IMTJ Medical Travel Awards and selected for some other prestigious awards in health tourism. The development of the Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster in promotional activities and economic indicators are tracked from 2016 to the present days. The authors want to find out how promotional tools and strategies have changed over the years and how this has affected the economic success of the cluster and associated organizations. The contribution of this paper is reflected in the identification of the most important promotional approaches and strategies for creating an image of an attractive destination for health tourism, as well as the most important economic indicators of health tourism success. Health tourism is also analyzed through examining different forms of health tourism, such as dental tourism. By comparing different forms of health tourism, the authors aim to describe the similarities and differences in promotion and economic indicators in relation to each form of tourism within the cluster. The “architecture” of the cluster is examined to show how the organizations are connected and contribute to the success of the cluster in general.

Keywords: Health tourism, Destination image, Economic indicators, Promotion, Kvarner health tourism cluster

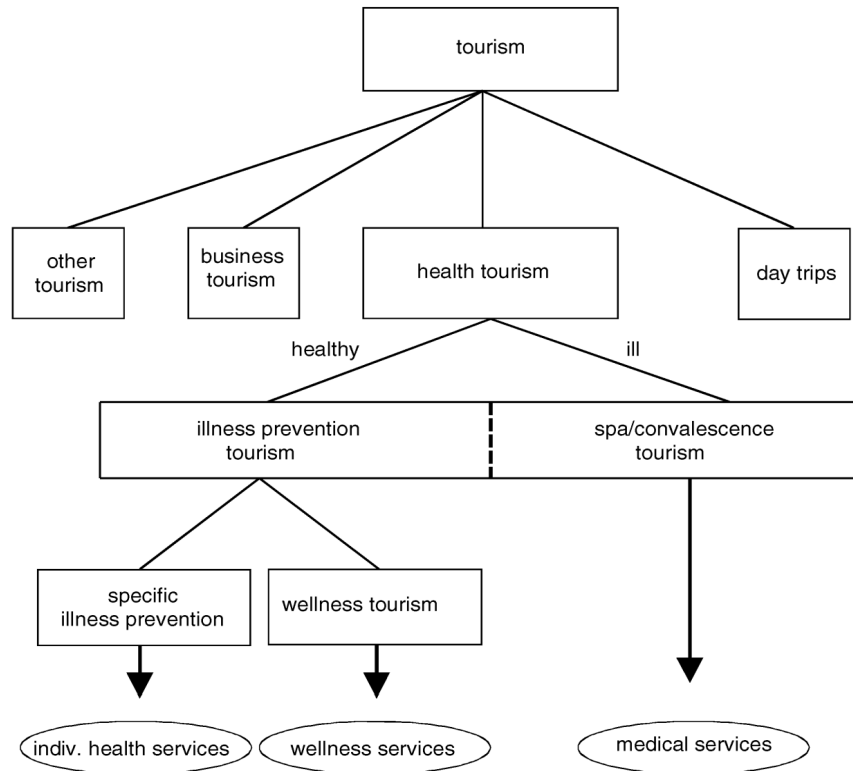
1. Introduction

This paper explores the unique aspects of health tourism promotion using the example of the Kvarner destination and the Health Tourism Cluster. The analysis of scientific research (Cetin, G. and Bilgihan., 2016; Manthiou et al., 2023) shows that the location of a tourism destination is of paramount importance for the health of visitors, as natural factors such as climate conditions, clean air and proximity to the sea can significantly contribute to the physical and mental health of tourists. A tourism destination is defined as a geographical area that attracts visitors, encompassing key characteristics such as accommodation capacities, attractions, marketing efforts, coordination and legislative regulations (Morrison, 2023). In the context of health tourism, the above factors become even more important as destinations such as Kvarner use their unique advantages, including specialized wellness and medical services, to attract international tourists

Kvarner region, as one of the leading Croatian destinations for health tourism, applies a specific approach to the promotion of its health services, which combines the natural resources with modern tourism and medical content. The aim of this paper is to analyze how the promotional activities of the Health Tourism Cluster contribute to increasing recognition of the Kvarner region on the international scene and its positioning as an attractive destination for health tourism.

Health tourism refers to travel with the aim of improving or preserving health. The International Union of Tourist Organizations (IUTO) defined health tourism in 1973 as “the provision of health services using a country’s natural resources, especially mineral waters and climate” (Smith and Puczkó, 2015). Health tourism subcategories are: “medical tourism, thermal tourism, spa and wellness tourism, tourism for the elderly, sports tourism and tourism for people with disabilities” (Hunjet et al., 2024). This form of tourism includes travel to use treatments, therapies or activities that improve or maintain certain health conditions. “The primary goal of health tourism is to contribute to the physical, mental and spiritual health of individuals through medical and wellness activities” (Hunjet et al., 2024). It is important to distinguish between the closely related concepts of health tourism and

medical tourism. These two terms are often used interchangeably in common discourse. Although these are overlapping concepts, health tourism is a broader term that also encompasses medical tourism, so Carrera and Bridges (2014) define this relationship as follows: health tourism as “the organized travel outside one's local environment for the maintenance, enhancement or restoration of an individual's wellbeing in mind and body” while medical tourism is perceived as “the organized travel outside one's natural healthcare jurisdiction for the enhancement or restoration of the individual's health through medical intervention”. Figure 1 shows the classification of different forms of tourism.



Source: Mueller i Kaufmann (2001: 8)

Figure 1: Classification of tourism types

In a competitive tourism market, where tourist demands are increasingly complex, tourism boards and other tourism stakeholders are striving to stand out from the competition by being recognizable and unique. For many tourism destinations, it is no longer enough to build an image of attractiveness based on a single advantage, such as natural beauty or cultural heritage. Instead, added value is expected to be created through a diverse offering, such as unique gastronomic experiences, adventure activities, sustainable practices, entertainment content and high-quality health services.

Kvarner is a specific Croatian region that is recognized for its benefits for health and well-being, since it is an area of a pleasant climate where mountainous and coastal nature merge. Berc Radišić et al. (2012) therefore point out that health tourism in Kvarner is promoted through the image of “an eminent Adriatic destination for wellness, thalassotherapy, and medical programs”. Kvarner is today profiled as the only region in Croatia that has formalized cooperation between stakeholders from different sectors, by establishing the Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster. Cooperation within the Cluster enables synergy of expertise from the medical, tourism and scientific sectors.

Global competition in the health tourism sector encourages destinations to continuously develop new products in order to stand out from the competition. Some of these products integrate health tourism components with other types of tourism (Polat and Öztürk, 2021) such as sports or cultural tourism, while others increase their attractiveness through the application of innovative practices. The Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster is an example of such an integrative approach that enables synergy between different sectors, including the pharmaceutical industry, tourism organizations, educational institutions and healthcare institutions. Promotion plays a

significant role in this process, serving as a key tool for increasing the recognition and competitiveness of the destination.

2. Unique Aspects of Promotion in Health Tourism

Health tourism managers increasingly rely on marketing and branding to attract and satisfy their consumers (Roman et al., 2022). Promotion in health tourism requires a specific approach, given that it differs from the promotion of other types of tourism. Marketing in tourism is increasingly moving from the use of traditional marketing tools to the implementation of digital technologies (Chamboko et al. 2021), which is especially evident in health tourism, where the importance of electronic communication is growing. Health tourism businesses are increasingly directing their activities towards digital channels in order to reach target groups more efficiently.

Promotion of tourism destinations implies an integrated approach in which different strategies and tactics of marketing and PR experts are intertwined. The combination of these communication activities is particularly pronounced in the process of tourism destination branding. Promotion of destinations highlighting health tourism benefits has its own unique characteristics. It is a promotion aimed at tourists who are looking for and have specific expectations from a unique experience during their stay in the destination. The results of the study by Han et al. (2017) show that health tourism encourages less engagement or participation than entertainment tourism, leisure tourism, and cultural tourism. Furthermore, the respondents who are most interested in this form of tourism are the population in their forties and fifties, and it is also specific that those who earn over \$4,000 per month opt for health tourism. Women are also more interested in this form of tourism than men (Han, Lee & Ryu, 2017). However, these preferences are influenced by cultural and other factors, so the results cannot be fully generalized to all tourists, but the results are indicative and show, given sociodemographic characteristics, which target audiences are addressed by tourism stakeholders in promoting destinations focused on health tourism. Based on the results of the survey, Han et al. (2017) propose several guidelines for increasing tourist participation in health tourism: 1. Creating travel (and also tourism) products that are thematically oriented towards health, in line with market demand; 2. Increasing promotional activities focused on health for all tourists, for example by organizing various exhibitions and events that indicate the attractiveness of this form of tourism.

Promotion of health tourism implies a specific discourse that focuses on the health benefits of tourists who prefer this form of experience with a tourism destination. In their research, Cortés de los Rios and Corral Hernández (2016) studied, from a linguistic perspective, the promotional discourse on the official websites of stakeholders promoting health and beauty in the territory of Andalusia. From their analysis, several observations emerge about how the attractiveness of health services can be stimulated among tourists, and for this purpose Andalusian health promoters use the following positive adjectives: "bubbling, rejuvenating, exfoliating, purifying, oxygenating, curative, medicinal, refreshing, revitalizing, relaxing, analgesic and toning. Some examples taken from the corpus are bubbling massage, rejuvenating facial massages, exfoliating massage, purifying properties, oxygenating spa, curative properties, medicinal thermal waters, refreshing and revitalizing treatment, relaxing, analgesic and toning action". (Cortés de los Rios & Corral Hernández, 2016). The specificity of addressing tourists who prefer or are inclined to use health services, within the intention of a visit to a tourism destination, includes the use of second-person personal pronouns with the purpose of direct and almost personalized addressing of the tourist as opposed to mass addressing of a group of consumers (Cortés de los Rios & Corral Hernández, 2016). This can encourage the perception of the service provider's commitment. Cortés de los Rios & Corral Hernández (2016) also point out that metaphors are very often used in promotional discourse for health services, thus trying to subtly encourage tourists to think about pleasure and in a figurative sense to evoke the experience of using the service.

Tourists visit tourism destinations for many reasons and are motivated by achieving a unique tourist experience. Mendes (2016) states that this experience is personal, inclusive, co-created with other tourists, intangible, and represents a staging created through various activities in a certain space. From this perspective, the uniqueness of experiences that include health services can also be studied. Studies on health-related behavior show that consumers create their own beliefs about what is healthy and based on these beliefs, they make decisions about the use of health services (Chang & Beise-Zee, 2013). This implies that it is important to have in-depth knowledge of geographic, demographic, psychographic, and behavioral variables when segmenting tourists (Kotler et al., 2006). The results of a study by Hunjet et al. (2024) indicate that most respondents consider the presence of health and wellness services to be a key factor in choosing a destination.

Since more and more tourists tend to use sources on the Internet when getting information about a destination, the concept of e-tourist has developed. This increasingly frequently used term implies an increasing and

important role of digital tools in organizing trips and visits to tourism destinations. E-tourist is defined as "the type of tourist who makes effective use of ICTs in the process of purchasing decision and while purchasing tourism products, during tourism experiences and in the evaluation process of tourism experiences." (Odemis, 2022). There is an increasing number of stakeholders in tourism that base their promotion on the use of digital tools. The study, which is dedicated to the development of health tourism and medical tourism on the island of Kish, shows how important it is to develop websites dedicated to these contents, to use digital advertising for the purpose of informing about hotel infrastructure and locations where the desired health services can be provided to tourists, to launch media campaigns which are dedicated to the promotion of health tourism for domestic and foreign tourists in cooperation with the tourist boards (Kazemha & Dehkordi, 2017). Another example like the E-Tour Facilitator Platform shows how digital platforms can easily connect different health services with the needs of patients/tourists and serve as another form of promotion (Halkiopoulou et al., 2020). On the example of medical tourism in India, Crooks et al. (2011) point out the importance of promoting and applying advanced technologies, emphasizing the advantages of safe and advanced health treatment, and avoiding messages that emphasize the low cost of health services due to the possible creation of a perception of low-quality services. Following the case of India, the promotion and growth of Indian medical tourism is, according to Mishra & Sharma (2021), connected with the development of soft and language skills. Regarding the promotion of health tourism in the Kvarner region and the use of communication tools, Berc Radišić et al. point out that a mix of modern promotional methods is used, which includes "advertising, sales promotion, public relations and personal selling" (2012: 173).

3. Analysis of Health Tourism Promotion of the Kvarner Cluster

Health tourism in Croatia has a long history and a rich tradition that has developed in accordance with natural resources and market needs. Each region in Croatia contributes to the development of this sector through its specific advantages, which include natural resources, cultural heritage and modern infrastructure. The development of health tourism in continental Croatia began in the early 20th century, primarily through spas, wellness and specific branches such as thermalism and hydrotherapy. In this context, the Kvarner region further stands out with its unique model of cooperation and integration of key stakeholders in the health tourism sector. According to research by Jónás-Berki et al. (2015), close cooperation among all stakeholders in health tourism starts from "tourism service providers, health care institutions, municipalities and public authorities".

The aim of the case study is to examine the promotional tools that can be effectively used to promote health tourism and destinations. The case of the Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster was selected for analysis due to its international recognition and the unique mix of organizations involved, culture and the special natural conditions of the Kvarner region. The descriptive case study examines the development of the cluster from its foundation in 2014 until today with a special focus on promotional activities and communication tools. Secondary data was used for the qualitative analysis, including web sources, available research findings and academic publications.

3.1 Analysis of the Kvarner Cluster's Offering

The Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster, founded in 2014, brings together 39 institutions with more than 9,500 employees. Membership includes hospitals, medical and dental clinics, hotels, educational institutions, tourist boards and travel agencies, ensuring an integrated approach to the offer.

Table 1 provides an overview of the Cluster's membership structure, emphasizing the diversity of partners and their roles in delivering a comprehensive health-tourism product, ensuring the synergy of expertise needed to create an integrated and competitive offering in the market. One of the main advantages of the Kvarner region as a desirable health-tourism destination is its climatically favorable and therapeutically beneficial natural environment. Features such as its climate, terrain, flora, and fauna are increasingly utilized in tourism (Geić et al., 2010), while the integration of modern medical practices with the healing properties of the local environment further enhances the overall experience. The Cluster is particularly focused on offering innovative treatments that leverage the healing potential of Kvarner's natural resources, positioning the region as a leader in the development of medical tourism.

Table 1: Cluster Members

	Sector	No. of members	Members
1	TOURIST BOARDS	7	Kvarner Region Tourist Board, Cres Tourist Board, Crikvenica Tourist Board, Gorski Kotar Tourist Board, Mali Lošinj Tourist Board, Opatija Tourist Board, Rijeka Tourist Board
2	PHARMACEUTICS	1	Jadran-galenski laboratory d.d. (JGL)
3	HOSPITALS AND CLINICS	15	Clinical Hospital Center Rijeka, Community Health Center Rijeka, Emergency Medicine Institute of the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, Pediatrics Plus Veli Lošinj, Health Resort Institution for Home Healthcare and Rehabilitation „Helena Smokrović“, Istrian Health Care Center, Orthopaedic and Rehabilitation Hospital “Martin Horvat” Rovinj, Polyclinic Analiza, Polyclinic Terme Selce, Special Hospital Dr. Nemec, Specialty Hospital Medico, Teaching Institute of Public Health Thalassotherapia Crikvenica, Thalassotherapia Opatija
4	DENTAL CLINICS	4	Dental Center Kalmar Implant Dentistry, Dental Clinics Rident, Dental Medicine Center Orto-Nova, Dental Clinic Dr. Jelušić
5	EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS	3	Faculty of Economics and Business, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Faculty of Dental Medicine
6	HOTELS	7	Amadria Park Opatija, Cresanka d.d., Jadran Hotels, Jadran Hotels & Camps, Liburnia Hotels & Villas, Lošinj Hotels and Villas, Le Premier
7	TRAVEL AGENCIES	2	MedAdria Travel, Agency Travel Agency Olivari

Source: Kvarner health tourism cluster (2024)

Table 2 presents an overview of the diverse services available to tourists, reflecting Kvarner's comprehensive approach to meeting varied health-tourism needs, making it additionally attractive to international tourists.

Table 2: Service offering within the Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster

	Sector	Services offered
1	TOURIST BOARDS	MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences & Exhibitions)
2	PHARMACEUTICS	Aqua Maris product line that uses marine ingredients., Products for Allergie, Skin, Immunity and Women's health
3	HOSPITALS AND CLINICS	Primary care, Internal medicine, Tourist medicine, Occupational and sport medicine, Pediatrics, Dermatology, Medical wellness, Surgery, Specialized programmes for active ageing, Plastic surgery, Post-COVID pulmonary rehabilitation
4	DENTAL CLINICS	Oral surgery, Implantology, Prosthetics, Orthodontics, Plasma (PRP) treatments, Aesthetic dental medicine
5	EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS	Numerous scientific and professional projects aimed at improving the tourism offering
6	HOTELS	Accommodation, Wellness & spa, Beauty Studios, Children's playground, Aesthetic beauty salons, Tennis courts, Congress tourism,, Bike rental, Fitness center
7	TRAVEL AGENCIES	Tour guide services, Rent-a-car service, Boat charter

Source: Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster (2024)

The process of traveling to medical destinations to receive the most modern medical treatments at the lowest possible cost requires thorough market research and identification of the unique advantages and core competencies of the host country as a medical destination (Bagga et al., 2020).

In conducting promotional activities at home and abroad, tourist boards have a significant role. According to the Act on Tourist Boards and the Promotion of Croatian Tourism, "Tourist boards are organizations that operate according to the principle of destination management, and are established for the purpose of promoting and developing tourism" that carry out tourism-related activities "in a way that they manage the destination at the level for which they were established" (Law, 2019: Article 4), and there are 7 such boards in the Kvarner region. The second mentioned segment of the Cluster's offer refers to pharmaceuticals, represented by Jadran-galenski laboratory d.d., as an established manufacturer of pharmaceutical products with a special emphasis on the Aqua Maris line, which combines the Adriatic heritage and supports a natural and healthy lifestyle. The company collaborates with other Cluster members on various projects of common interest, aiming to leverage collective strength and expertise in the health industry segment (JGL, 2020).

Furthermore, Kvarner's health tourism includes a wide range of health services, from public and private hospitals to health resorts. These facilities form a specific regional environment that ensures the health of the local population and tourists who come for treatment or recovery. Four dental clinics are included in the Cluster and over 70,000 procedures are performed there annually (Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster, 2024). Within the framework of the healthcare offer, the dental organizations that are members of the cluster pride themselves on the high quality of services, using the most modern technology and approach in every segment of dental care, thus providing patients with optimal results and improved oral health. These advanced services provide not only functional, but also aesthetic results that improve the quality of life and self-confidence of patients.

Scientific institutions play an extremely important role in the development of tourism in Kvarner, having professionally shaped and educated thousands of students. "The rising generation of healthcare professionals increasingly demands that their education prepare them to create and work in a more sustainable future" (Green and Legard, 2020). These institutions also participate in numerous scientific and professional projects that improve health tourism and contribute to its further development. As for hotels, there are seven members in total, with over 14,000 beds. In addition to high-quality accommodation, hotels offer a variety of services and facilities, including wellness and spa centers, beauty studios, children's playgrounds, aesthetic beauty salons, tennis courts, congress tourism, bicycle rental and fitness centers. These facilities allow guests to relax, recreation and active vacation, while congress tourism allows the organization of business events in modern and well-equipped spaces. With such an offer, the destination meets the needs and desires of both family guests and business travelers. These hotels and spa resorts can target high-end guests who are willing to spend significant amounts on luxury health services, but also the middle class who can afford mid-range services, thus attracting a wide range of visitors with different budgets (Goodrich, 1994). Travel agencies such as MedAdria offer accommodation, transfers, excursions and travel arrangements according to the wishes of the clients. Their focus on wellness and VIP services, such as the MedAdria Wellness Club, is important for the promotion of Kvarner as a destination for luxury and health tourism.

The growth of the health tourism sector is closely linked to the extension of the tourist season, which ensures greater capacity utilization and increases the income of destinations. Kvarner, given its specificity and wealth of natural resources, has the potential to attract visitors outside the main summer season, thus reducing the seasonality that is otherwise present in many tourist regions. This allows for the continuous operation of accommodation facilities, wellness centers, medical institutions and other key services, which significantly increases the economic impact of tourism throughout the year (Peršić and Janković, 2012).

The development of this type of tourism creates new jobs in the health, tourism and education sectors, which also creates benefits for local communities. By increasing the number of visitors coming for specialized treatments, the region can also expect the development of new infrastructure, which further stimulates the local economy. By integrating all these segments, the Kvarner health tourism cluster contributes to the sustainable economic development of the region and lays the foundations for long-term growth and competitiveness at the international level. It is estimated that in the past four years, around 280 thousand guests have visited the Kvarner region for health services. Most of them were foreign guests, primarily for dental services, and then in the field of various rehabilitation segments and selective forms of diagnostic, therapeutic/surgical procedures.

3.2 Promotion, Strategic Initiatives and Reputation of the Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster

The Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster employs specialized brands and services to attract diverse tourist segments, such as families with pets, cyclists, and hikers, through projects like "Kvarner Family" and its sub-brands "Pet," "Bike," and "Hike," offering tailored accommodations and outdoor activities. This approach aligns with Kvarner's reputation for promoting active lifestyles and family-oriented tourism while reflecting the regional slogan "Diversity is Beautiful." The "Kvarner Health and Wellbeing" project further enhances the region's profile in international tourism, highlighting its long-standing tradition in health tourism and showcasing its diverse medical facilities. Kvarner capitalizes on the therapeutic properties of its natural resources, including its crystal-clear sea and beneficial climate, emphasizing the concept of "therapy from the sea," which encompasses rehabilitation, anti-aging procedures, and relaxation techniques (Bates & Silkoff, 2003). Notable terms such as climatotherapy-thalassotherapy and post-COVID rehabilitation are central to its offerings, with studies demonstrating the effectiveness of such treatments, particularly in respiratory health improvement. For example, research by Zvonarek Valkovic (2012) found significant benefits for children with asthma who underwent climatotherapy-thalassotherapy.

Kvarner's positioning as a destination for natural therapies and recovery is supported by strategic initiatives and participation in international events that enhance its global visibility. The Cluster participated in the 6th Annual ACAP Conference, supported by the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County Tourist Board (TZ PGŽ), which provided an opportunity to connect with key stakeholders and strengthen global collaborations. At EXPO 2020 Dubai, Cluster members - including Jadran Galenski Laboratorij, Polyclinic Terme Selce, Thalassotherapy Opatija, Special Hospital Dr. Nemec, and Special Hospital Medico - showcased Kvarner's health and wellness offerings to a global audience. The "Full of Well Being" business workshop, organized by the Croatian National Tourist Board (HTZ) in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, enabled Cluster members to conduct over forty business meetings with potential partners. Such events offer exceptional opportunities to present Kvarner's health and wellness services as an attractive destination for international tourists, further solidifying its position on the global health tourism stage.

Additional initiatives include the first Terme Selce International Congress in 2022, supported by the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County Tourist Board, which addressed critical topics such as employee health and stress management, and participation in the European Medical Tourism Workshop in Abano Terme, where the Cluster introduced its offerings to the Italian market. The 10th Crikvenica International Health Tourism Conference in 2022 brought together experts from seven countries, further establishing Kvarner as a prominent player in global health tourism. These efforts are complemented by digital marketing strategies that utilize social media to provide clear and detailed information about medical services, facilities, and patient success stories, building trust among potential medical tourists. By emphasizing the region's natural therapeutic resources and successful treatment outcomes, Kvarner not only attracts international visitors but also fosters long-term confidence in the quality and effectiveness of its health tourism offerings, driving the region's continued growth in this sector. Table 3 shows the use of social networks in the promotion of Kvarner tourism and health services by five selected Cluster members.

Table 3 shows that Facebook is the most commonly used platform, followed by Instagram and YouTube. The organizations publish diverse content, ranging from medical service promotions to tourist attractions, which is tailored to their target audience. Posting frequency varies from daily to monthly, depending on the organization. Content includes text and video posts, virtual tours, blogs, and patient reviews. Each member has a unique strategy that aligns with their specific goals and target audience, whether it's potential patients, tourists, families, or students.

Table 3: Use of social networks in the promotion of Kvarner tourism and health services

Cluster Member	Social Networks	Type of Activity	Target Audience	Frequency of Posts	Type of Content
Thalassotherapy Crikvenica	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube	Promotion of medical services and therapies	Potential patients, tourists, lung patients	Daily/ Weekly/ Monthly	Text and video posts with information about services and success stories, information about discounts

Cluster Member	Social Networks	Type of Activity	Target Audience	Frequency of Posts	Type of Content
Dental Clinic Rident	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn	Promotion of all dental services in one place	Potential patients, tourists, families	Daily/ Weekly/ Monthly	Text and video posts with case studies, patient reviews, introducing dental specialists, useful tips on dental hygiene
The Kvarner Region Tourist Board	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube	Promotion of Kvarner as a destination for various types of tourism (business, health, nautical, etc.)	Foreign and domestic guests, tourists of all generations and families	Daily/ Weekly/ Monthly	Text and video posts about numerous activities in the Kvarner area, attractive events
JGL	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn	Education, Product promotion	Family, children	Weekly/ Monthly	Text posts about key products and the company
Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management	Facebook, LinkedIn	Information about important events, international, academic life	Students	Daily/Weekly	Text and video posts

Source: Thalassotherapy Crikvenica (2024), Dental Clinic Rident (2024), The Kvarner Region Tourist Board (2024), JGL (2024), Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management (2024)

Fetscherin and Stephano (2016) emphasize that patients choose tourism destinations with regard to the reputation of medical personnel and the recognition of medical facilities, factors that are increasingly influenced by social media presence and the messages communicated on these platforms. The quality and reputation of medical institutions, as well as the acknowledgment of specialists, are key motivators for international patients seeking healthcare services abroad. Social media amplifies this effect by allowing healthcare providers to showcase their expertise, share patient testimonials, and highlight institutional achievements, directly shaping perceptions and trust among potential clients.

This dynamic is particularly relevant for the Kvarner region, where institutions such as the Special Hospital Dr. Nemeč and the Polyclinic Terme Selce play a pivotal role in shaping the region's image as an attractive health tourism destination. The reputation of these institutions and the recognition they receive from patients, both domestically and internationally, are further reinforced by strategic digital communication. The expertise and innovative approaches offered by these facilities, combined with the presence of highly educated medical professionals and effective use of social media, significantly enhance the region's appeal and competitiveness in the global health tourism market.

4. Conclusion

Health tourism is an important and specific form of tourism that has played an increasingly significant role in the recognition and attractiveness of tourism destinations in recent years. It has become an integral part of destination image creation and branding for locations with the environmental and infrastructural prerequisites necessary for the development of such tourism. The promotion of health tourism is unique in that it primarily emphasizes the health and well-being benefits for users of health services and the overall tourist experience. This leads to a specific discourse used in the promotion of health services, with digital content and platforms connecting tourists with desired health services becoming essential tools for decision-making regarding visits and stay arrangements at a destination. Communication with health tourism enthusiasts should be direct and highly personalized, highlighting the health benefits and the comfort provided by such a tourism experience. In order to make health tourism more accessible to a broader population of tourists, it is necessary to encourage the organization of events aimed at raising awareness about health for various groups of tourists based on age, gender, income, etc. An increasing number of stakeholders in health tourism have recognized the importance

of digital tools such as websites and social media for attracting tourists, including those operating in the Kvarner region. This is a region that possesses the prerequisites for strong development in this form of tourism.

The case of Kvarner Health Tourism Cluster shows an innovative cooperation model that integrates key stakeholders from various sectors, including healthcare institutions, hotels, educational institutions, and tourist organizations. This unique approach creates a synergy of expertise from the medical, tourism, and scientific sectors, resulting in a comprehensive offering that meets the growing global demand for high-quality healthcare services in an attractive tourist setting. Cluster members use diverse promotional channels, with a particular focus on digital platforms such as social media and websites, to effectively communicate their services to various market segments. Promotional messages highlight the region's unique advantages, including natural healing resources, high-quality medical care, and a rich tourism offer. Services encompass a wide range, from specialized medical treatments and dental services to wellness programs and rehabilitation, tailored to the diverse needs and preferences of guests. The Cluster not only attracts international patients but also fosters healthcare innovations, creates new jobs, and contributes to the overall economic growth of the region. Through strategic initiatives, participation in international events, and the effective use of digital marketing, Kvarner is positioning itself as a leading health tourism destination in Europe.

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