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## Social media communication of the spa industry during the four waves of the COVID-19 pandemic

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**Abstract.** Tourism and the spa industry have been heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The social media strategies of top spa destinations were studied during the period from March 1, 2020, through February 28, 2022. Together There are 2,539 posts of selected spas (from Iceland, Austria, Slovakia, and Hungary). Based on former research, four major themes emerged: (i) Facebook versus Instagram communication during the two years of the pandemic; (ii) Live Vividness of the social media communication; (iii) Activity of the followers; (iv) Use of hashtags. Findings show that social media plays a significant role in fighting against the negative impacts of a crisis. Communication on social media is especially effective when emotional, affective images and positive emotions are presented to the target customers. Our findings extend not only crisis management theory, but also provide valuable insights into tourists' psychometrics, which is essential for tourism destinations in developing their communication strategies.

**Keywords:** social media, Facebook, Instagram, communication, content analysis, pandemic, spa industry

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The most prominent disaster of the 21st century was COVID-19 which caused significant changes in the world economy, and consumption patterns (Rybaczewska et al., 2021, Huszka et al., 2022) and market demand, and affected all industries (Zenker and Kock, 2020, Lizińska et al., 2022). The hotel and the hospitality sector has been reshaped since the outbreak of the pandemic, when the first confirmed case was detected in December 2019. Until this time, the tourism sector was developing, and the spa sector was attractive to families (Jelínková et al., 2017). Several authorities and world organizations have released guidelines and recommendations for accommodation establishment (CDC, 2020; WHO, 2020). Furthermore, several experts stated that the performance of the hotels will take several years to make it up to the level it was before the outbreak (Choe, et al., 2020). International literature distinguishes different “waves” of the pandemic (Agbehadji et al., 2021), which relates to a rise in the number of COVID-19 cases. Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn (2021) differentiated the response, recovery, and reopening stages of the pandemic. In the timeline, the European Union distinguished the first wave (closure: from March 11, 2020, to July 17, 2020), the second wave (reopening: from July 18, 2020, to October 2020), the third wave (closure: from 2021 November 17) and the fourth wave, when national restrictions were abandoned (European Council, 2022). The global pandemic has challenged national economies. The governments established measures to reduce transmission of COVID-19 from person to person, therefore, introducing precautions limiting the mobility of people across borders and within the country. Other measures have also been introduced, such as the lockdown of certain businesses, such as spas and wellness centres. Consequently, the tourism sector was among the worst affected (Choudhary - Qadir, 2021).

Effective crisis management requires an in-depth understanding of how organizations can influence stakeholder perceptions (Kwok et al., 2022), hence, the research that helps the tourism sector cope with future crisis events with a more effective communication strategy is not only timely but also of essential importance. Social media is found to be a critical communication channel with customers today. In addition, it is also an open space for expressing the public's opinion and managing tourists' risk perception (Liu et al., 2021). On the other hand, social media can pose considerable risks due to the spread of fake news, that is the distribution of false and manipulated information, images, and sounds, which limits its usefulness in times of crisis (Mirbabaie et al., 2020). Thus, studies that explore the drivers of social media usage by tourists in times of crisis are vital for businesses (Schroeder et al., 2013).

In response to this research gap, the present study aims to answer the question of how the spa and wellness sector used social media to mitigate the damages caused by COVID-19. According to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that examined all four waves of the pandemic together in the example of the spa industry. Results indicate that social media plays a significant role in fighting against the negative impacts of a crisis. Communication on social media is especially effective when emotional, affective images and positive emotions are presented to the target customers. Our results cover not only crisis management theory, but, at the same time, they enable us to see into users' activity, which is of primary importance for tourism destinations in developing their communication strategies.

The paper begins with a review of the relevant literature focusing on social media, especially Facebook and Instagram communication, and pandemic communication, i.e. COVID-19 communication. It is followed by the introduction of empirical research using the method of multiple case studies and content analysis. Findings are provided in section four, and finally, a discussion of the result, managerial implications and limitations of the present research are presented in section five.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Social media communication

Social media can be defined as a set of platforms that allow sharing information, different views/thoughts, and experiences (Pelsmacker et al., 2018). The web-based applications allow users to start conversations and enrich content with pictures, videos, and audio (Safko, 2010). Users can collaborate, add, edit, share and tag content of different kinds, such as text, video, photo, and sounds (Pelsmacker et al., 2018). Regarding users' intention to experience, users have several types of social media sites with varied features. Furthermore, those sites differ in how advanced tools, for instance, instant messaging, blogging, video/music sharing and games, are provided to the users (Zolkepli - Kamarulzaman, 2015). With the growing importance of social media platforms, consumers use them as a source of information (Westerman et al., 2014). On the other hand, companies analyse social media activities to professionalise their social media engagement (Benthaus et al., 2016). The hospitality and tourism industry is using social media intensively to distribute news (Wut et al., 2021). Social media can be classified based on media richness and self-disclosure. When media richness is at a medium level, while self-disclosure is high, we can talk about social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram.

The leading social media platforms used by marketers in 2021 were Facebook and Instagram. A mid-2019 survey among global marketing professionals found that photo ads on Instagram were considered the most effective ad format on the platform, according to 29% of respondents. Around 8% of respondents said that carousel ads on Instagram were effective (Statista, 2022c). Facebook was the first social network with more than 2.89 billion monthly active users worldwide (Statista, 2022d). Approximately 9.3% of Facebook's audience were women between 18 and 24 years old, while male users between 25 and 34 years were the biggest demographic group on the social media platform (Statista, 2022d). According to a global survey, 90% of responding social media marketers used the network to promote their business, while another 79% did so via Instagram (Statista, 2022e).

Instagram is a popular social networking site, which allows users to share content via images. Today, Instagram also offers video and story sharing (Statista, 2022a). Instagram was ranked third in terms of hours per week spent on the platform (Statista, 2022b). Yu and Sun (2019) attempted to discover the most popular user-generated content. They found that popularity is correlated with vividness (text, image, video), interactivity (link embedded in the post), informational content, entertaining content, position, and valence of the comment (positive and negative comments). Staniewski and Awruk (2022) found that Instagram had an impact on users' mental well-being and behaviour during the pandemic. Filieri et al. (2021) investigated how consumers express their love towards tourist destinations.

### 2.2. Pandemic communication

Pandemic communication has become an interesting topic since the beginning of the 21st century when the economic impacts of Covid-19 induced a tourism crisis (Zenker et al., 2021, Gyimóthy et al., 2022, Salem et al., 2021). Atkinson et al. (2021) compared Instagram and Facebook communication of alcohol brands during the first UK lockdown. The coronavirus disease has resulted in tremendous changes regarding service safety and transformed service operations into a new mode of practice for increased separability and decreased contact (Berry et al., 2020).

Many authors started to analyse the impact of the pandemic on the travel and tourism industry (Škare et al., 2021; Zenker and Kock, 2020). They identified six fields of research (1) the level of complexity, (2) change in the destination image, (3) change in tourist behaviour, (4) change in resident behaviour, (5) change in the tourism industry, and (6) long-term and indirect effects.

The hospitality sector was also analysed. Ryu et al. (2022) highlighted the practice of self-protection. Huang et al. (2022) explored the sources of complaints from guests attending restaurants. They found that personal protection measures and environmental safety measures were the reasons for negative comments. Wut et al. (2021) tried to understand how crisis management practices have been adopted in the industry and identified social media as one of the most important trends in crisis communication. They also suggested that the similarities and differences between social media platforms for crisis management strategies should be taken into consideration. They also advised conducting research for exploring what can be effective crisis management strategies in the digital era.

Li et al. (2022) used a qualitative content analysis of hotels and restaurants to analyse Twitter replies. The authors found that inventive response strategy, argument quality, and assertive language can reinforce positive emotions during the pandemic, whereas economising response strategies for all types of restaurants should be avoided. Wang et al. (2023) examined how the interaction between emoji (emotional vs. semantic) and social media content (aesthetic experience vs. promotion) influenced consumer engagement in the digital communication of tourism brands. In their experiment, they found that for aesthetic experience content, emotional emoji caused more consumer engagement than semantic emoji did.

### **2.3. Social media communication during the pandemic**

More authors highlighted the importance of communication (Sigala, 2020, Villacé-Molinero et al., 2021) on social media during Covid-19. Kwok et al. (2022) analysed 657 Facebook and 754 Twitter posts published by eight of the world's largest hotel chains between January and mid-June of 2020 which was the first wave of the pandemic period. Their expository analysis showed that hotels shared five different types of COVID-19 (Prevention, Reminding, Ingratiation, Victimage, and Updates) posts contrasted to those not related to COVID-19. Surprisingly, hotels did not share any COVID-19 information until March 2020. Furthermore, while COVID-19 messages only accounted for about 20% of all posts, COVID-19 posts elicited more reactions, comments, and shares/retweets than non-COVID-19 posts on both Facebook and Twitter.

Wong et al. (2021) tried to understand how international hotel enterprises responded to the present pandemic through the linguistic analysis of press releases from hotel corporations listed in the Fortune 500 within the period of January to April 2020. The hotel industry did not fully prepare for the crisis until March. The overall tone of communication gradually changed during the crisis. Zizka et al. (2021) investigated the messages from 73 independent 4 and 5-star hotels showing that most hotels did not publish messages regarding the coronavirus or the measures they have taken; instead, the hotels posted positive messages about reopening their rooms and services. Fecker et al. (2021) explored the crisis communication of family-led hotels in Tyrol in the spring and summer of 2020, during the first and second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic following a mixed-method approach. First, they performed a quantitative analysis of the hashtags, and after, they conducted a qualitative content analysis of the pictures and respective descriptions. They showed that social media was rarely used for communicating about the crisis, rather hotels made effort to convey the image of resilient and secure places.

In their study, Chen et al. (2022) explored the attitudes of tourists toward the crisis. Analysing 2259 social media entries, they found that in their discourse social media users - aka potential tourists - are either cautiously optimistic or highly realistic. Table 1. Summarizes results of former studies.

Table 1

Summary of content analysis in the hospitality and tourism literature about the COVID-19 pandemic

Authors	Subject	Platform	Time period	Results
Kwok et al. (2022)	8 of the world's largest hotel chains	657 <i>Facebook</i> and 754 <i>Twitter</i> messages	between January and mid-June 2020	Identified messages: Prevention, Reminding, Ingratiation, and Updates of Covid19 versus Non-Covid19 messages.
Wong et al. (2021)	International hotel corporations listed in Fortune 500	<i>press releases</i>	the period of January to April 2020	The tone of the communication protocol also transformed to recast management's sincerity in soliciting support and understanding.
Zizka et al. (2021)	73 independent 4 and 5-star Swiss hotels	official <i>websites</i> and <i>Facebook</i> pages	in the spring and summer of 2020	The hotels posted positive messages about reopening their rooms and services. Official hotel websites emphasized deals and offer while the Facebook pages concentrated on enthusiastic 'welcome back' messages.
Fecker et al. (2021)	7 family-led hotels in Tyrol and its borders	598 <i>Instagram</i> posts	in the spring and summer of 2020	The focus of communication rather lies on positive attitudes, emotions, and classic Alpine marketing topics.
Li et al. (2022)	49 UK hotels,  47 restaurants	262 announcements and 2953 consumer comments 211 <i>Twitter</i> announcements 12,252 consumer comments	from March 1 2020 to 31 July 2020	Combining innovative response strategy, argument quality, and assertive language can reinforce positive emotions during the COVID-19 crisis.
Chen et al. (2022)	in situ analysis Diamond Princess	1140 social media entries in English and 1119 entries in Japanese	from 1 February 2020 till 19 February 2020	The resilience of tourists under extreme circumstances, explain similarities and differences in tourists' experience mediated by language and show their supportive attitude toward tourist industry players.

*Source:* own processing

Based on the literature review, the authors aimed to understand the difference between communication on Facebook and Instagram for the selected spas and formulated the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the difference between communication on Facebook and Instagram for the selected spas during the two years of the pandemic?  
RQ2: What kind of content do spas publish on Facebook and Instagram?  
RQ3: What is the typical follower activity for each spa?  
RQ4: How do spas use hashtags on the main social media platforms?

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study combines multiple case study methodologies as well as qualitative and quantitative content analysis (Stake, 2013). The selection criteria should be internationally recognized spas visited by European

guests. Five spas from 4 different European countries, namely Iceland, Slovakia, Austria and Hungary were chosen for the analysis.

- *Blue Lagoon* is in the Reykjanes UNESCO Global Geopark, Blue Lagoon Iceland with its iconic waters and volcanic terrain attracts many celebrities. The exclusive lounge serves this elite and highly solvent market segment that meets high-end demand too.
- *AquaCity Poprad* has 13 outdoor and indoor pools with a temperature of thermal water 28°C – 38°C, water slides and more than 350 water attractions. Water in the thermal pools contains more than 20 different minerals beneficial to human health. It helps with movement and respiratory system problems, blood circulation, nervous system and has beneficial cosmetic effects (Aquacity Poprad).
- *Gastein Valley* is Europe's most modern world of health and well-being.
- The *Thermal Resort Loipersdorf* resort is nestled in the hilly landscape of eastern Styria. In three themed areas, bathers will find a classic spa experience, fun in the water as well as exclusive relaxation on 23,000m<sup>2</sup> from April to October.
- The *Hungarospa Hajdúszoboszló* has an almost 100-year-old history in Hungary. Thanks to its medicinal water, it is a highly visited destination. It has an aquapark for family entertainment. The most significant attraction is Europe's only Mediterranean beach with beautiful sights. Table 2 summarizes the basic facts about the social media presence of the selected spas.

Table 2

Basic facts about the social media accounts of the selected spas

Selected spas	Facebook		Instagram	
	Number of likes	Reviews	Number of followers	Following
<b>Blue Lagoon Iceland</b>	256,682	4.8 (6,285 reviews)	197K	94
<b>AquaCity Poprad</b>	51,635	no reviews available	13.5K	311
<b>Alpentherme</b>	11,200	4.5 (11,200 reviews)	326	21
<b>Loipersdorf</b>	69,789	4.5 (1.944 reviews)	18K	746
<b>Hungarospa</b>	44,180	4.6 (510 reviews)	3,041	1,282

Source: Own compilation based on public data on Facebook and Instagram (26 July 2022)

## Measurement

Each Facebook and Instagram post of the five spas between March 1, 2020 and February 28, 2022 was collected and analysed. First *visual appeals* - photo, video, and GIF images, and then thematic analysis was used to identify themes (*category of the posts*) in the data. A codebook was developed with the identification of codes and descriptions. The codes were grouped into themes and subthemes thus categories were created by the authors. The refining of the list was a collaborative job and redundant themes were removed (Bryman, 2016; Kvale – Brinkmann, 2009). Finally, eight different themes were identified: (1) scene, (2) own products, (3) celebrations, anniversaries, (4) research, (5) Covid-19 posts, (6) promotion (7) services and (8) job opportunities (Table 3).

Table 3

The identified categories of the posts

Category	Themes	Details	Other attributes
<b>(1) Scene</b>	landscape happening bathing kids	services (restaurant, menu, fitness room, pools)	reconstruction, renovation
<b>(2) Own products</b>		Wellness, beauty	need, desire
<b>(3) Celebration</b>	anniversary	holiday (New Year, Valentine's day, Women's day, Easter, Christmas, etc.)	
<b>(4) Research</b>	questionnaire	strategy	
<b>(5) Covid-19</b>	lockdown re-opening	Aims for the end of Covid-19 waves	restrictions, regulations, measures
<b>(6) Promotion</b>	giveaway	promotion code	contest
<b>(7) Services</b>	opening hours	events (bathing nights, sauna sessions)concerts, programs	inspiration, desire
<b>(8) Job opportunities</b>			

The activity of the followers was measured by the number of emojis (Facebook) and loves (Instagram), comments, and shares just like in the study of Yu and Sun (2019). Facebook provides animated “emoji” reactions to posts (Like, Love, Care, Haha, Wow, Sad, and Angry). In the analysis, only likes on Facebook and loves on Instagram were considered. The analysis of the hashtags enabled authors to identify the most active and influential hashtags.

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 26 statistical software. Normality was assessed for the distribution of Facebook and Instagram posts using descriptive statistics and normality tests. We concluded that the sample size is relatively small and significantly non-normal, and that there are outliers; therefore, non-parametric analyses were performed to answer RQ1, RQ3, and RQ4. The Mann-Whitney U test is the most commonly used alternative to the two independent samples t-test (Nurosis, 2003).  $P \leq 0.05$  was the threshold for statistical significance. We compared the monthly frequency of communication on Facebook and Instagram (RQ1), follower activity on Facebook and Instagram (RQ3), and the number of hashtags on Facebook and Instagram (RQ4). In addition, to analyse the content of the selected spas' communication on Facebook and Instagram and thus answer RQ2, Pearson's nonparametric chi-squared tests were performed.

## 4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The findings drawn from social media data are organized into four major themes: (i) Facebook versus Instagram communication during the two years of the pandemic; (ii) Vividness of the social media communication; (iii) Activity of the followers; (iv) Use of hashtags.

### 4.1. Results of Facebook and Instagram communication

Considering *Blue Lagoon Iceland* (BL) social media communication altogether 1,093 posts were analysed, 568 on Facebook and 525 on Instagram. The least active months were February (5 posts on Facebook, 4 posts on Instagram) and March (5 posts on Facebook, 4 posts on Instagram) of 2021 with 9 posts. The most active month was March 2020 (72 posts), with 38 posts on Facebook and 34 posts on Instagram. Hence we can conclude that Blue Lagoon uses Facebook and Instagram in a pretty similar way, there is no significant difference in the number of posts monthly (Figure 1, Figure 2).

Considering *AquaCity Poprad (ACP)* social media communication altogether 564 posts were analysed, 346 on Facebook and 218 on Instagram, nearly half of the posts than in the case of Blue Lagoon Iceland. The least active month on Facebook was January 2021 (4 posts) and February 2021 (4 posts) on Instagram. The most active month was July 2020 (54 posts), with 39 posts on Facebook and 15 posts on Instagram. There is a seasonality in the number of posts since the spa is posting more in July and August than in other months, especially on Facebook. All in all, we can state that AquaCity Poprad uses Facebook more intensively than Instagram, however, there was not a significant difference ( $\chi^2=34.22$ ;  $p=0.06$ ) in the number of posts monthly (Figure 1, Figure 2).

Considering *Alpentherme (AT)* social media communication altogether 307 posts were analysed, 232 on Facebook and 75 on Instagram. The least active months were November (4 posts on Facebook, 1 post on Instagram) of 2020 with 5 posts. The most active month was September of 2021 (26 posts), with 17 posts on Facebook and 9 posts on Instagram. All in all, we can state that Alpentherme uses more Facebook than Instagram (Figure 1, Figure 2).

Considering *Thermenresort Loipersdorf (LD)* social media communication altogether 347 posts were analysed, 344 on Facebook and 3 on Instagram. The least active months were March (6 posts on Facebook, 0 posts on Instagram) of 2020 and March (6 posts on Facebook, 0 posts on Instagram) of 2022 with 6 posts. The most active month was September of 2021 (26 posts), with 26 posts on Facebook and 0 posts on Instagram. All in all, we can state that Thermenresort Loipersdorf uses Facebook more than Instagram (Figure 1, Figure 2).

Considering *Hungarospa (HS)* social media communication altogether 228 posts were analysed, 126 on Facebook and 102 on Instagram. The least active months were March (1 post on Facebook, 0 posts on Instagram) of 2020 with 1 post. The most active month was August of 2021 (26 posts), with 7 posts on Facebook and 19 posts on Instagram. All in all, we can state that Hungarospa uses Facebook and Instagram in a pretty similar way (Figure 1, Figure 2).

In summary, we can conclude that Facebook was the preferred social media channel vis-à-vis Instagram. This could be explained by the age differences of the users. For example, Laor (2022) has found that Instagram users are typically younger than Facebook users. In addition, males, as well as single users, are more active on Instagram. Consequently, marketers may have greater confidence in reaching solvent demand on Facebook. The seasonality can be seen in social media communication, spas communicate less in winter times than in summer times, which is true for both social networks. Social media communication was less intensive in the third wave of the pandemic than in the other three waves, with a sharp decline in February and March 2021. This could be explained by the fact that the third wave (from November 2020 to April 2021) was the lockdown. The fourth wave has an optimistic character. Probably due to the rise in the number of vaccinated persons globally.



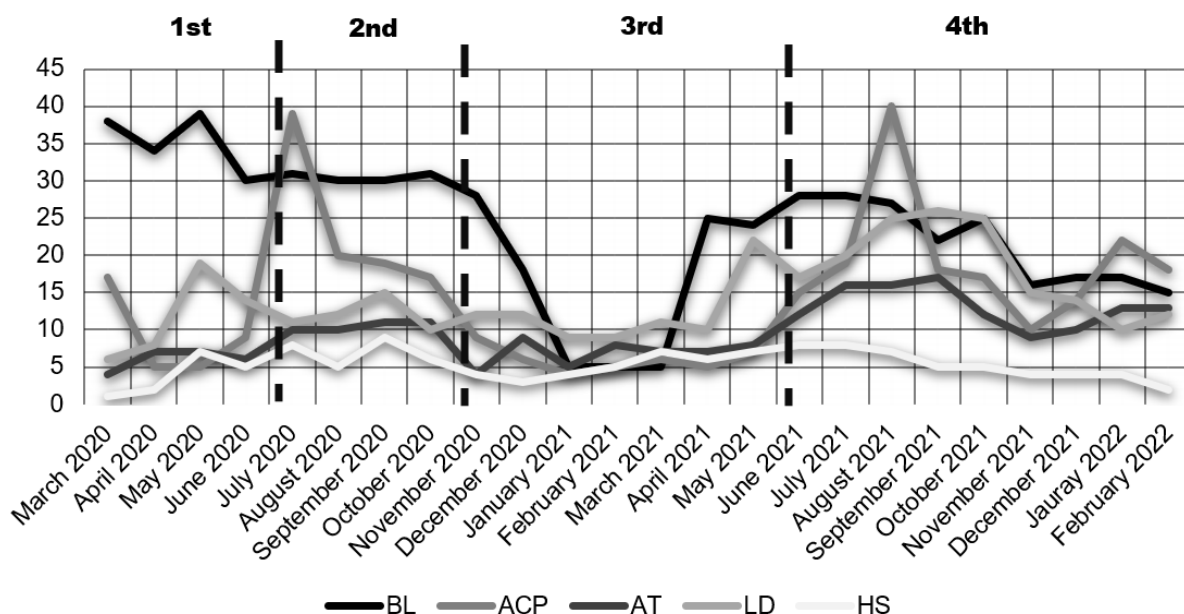


Figure 1. Facebook communication of selected spas

Source: own processing based on social media data

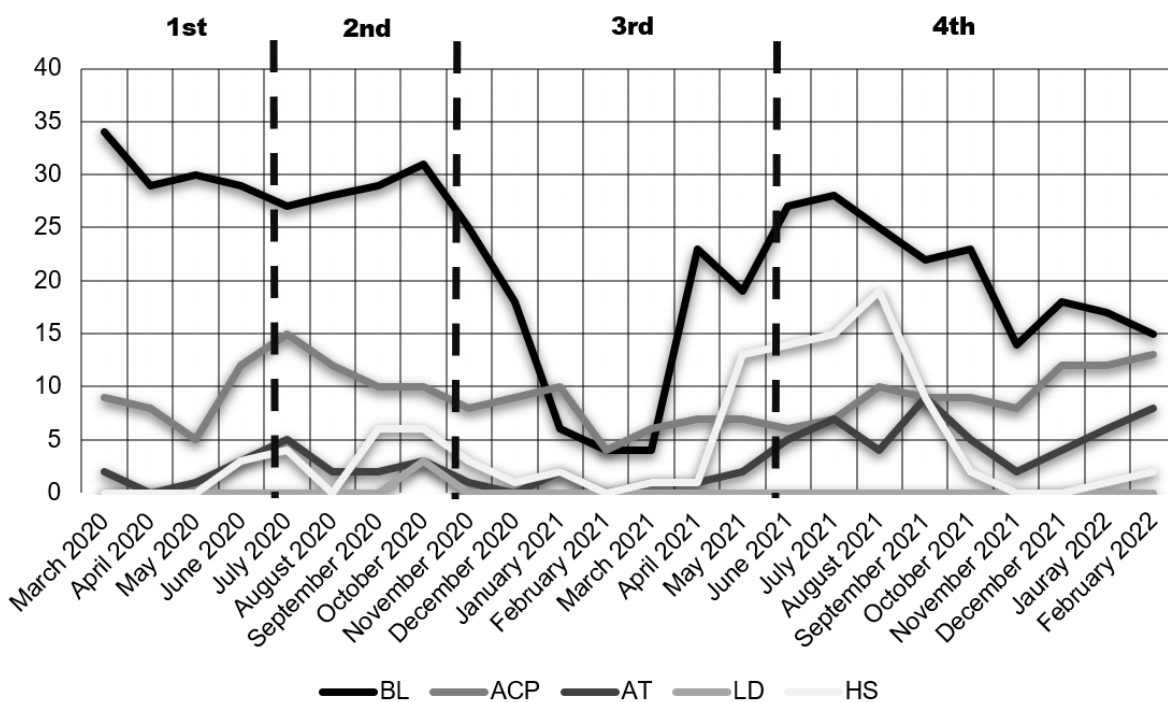


Figure 2. Instagram communication of selected spas

#### 4.2. Vividness of the social media communication

Considering the *visual appeals* in the case of Blue Lagoon Iceland photos are the most popular both on Facebook and on Instagram. Around 6% of the posts are video content. Less than 1% of the posts are GIFs. Considering the *content* of the posts, the scene, and the environment, the services are in focus on social media platforms. Advertising the webshop and its skincare products is popular, too. The other spas do not have their product like Blue Lagoon Iceland. Previously we supposed that Covid-19 posts and motivation

in the pandemic era were important occasions, but this has only marginal importance on both platforms. There is no significant difference between the number of promotional offers (giveaways) on Facebook and Instagram. All in all, we can say that Blue Lagoon Iceland is using Facebook and Instagram in a pretty similar way, the spa is uploading mainly photos on Facebook and Instagram, the focus is on the spa and the amazing environment and also on their products made from the mineral water (Table 4).

In the case of *AquaCity Poprad* photos are the most popular both on Facebook and Instagram. The video contents are more typical on Instagram than on Facebook. The GIFs content is also more typical in the case of Instagram than on Facebook. Considering the content of the posts, there is a significant association between the usage of the two analysed platforms ( $\chi^2=24.444$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). The environment, the services are in focus on social media platforms, especially Instagram. *AquaCity Poprad* does not have its own product like Blue Lagoon Iceland. In the social media communication of *AquaCity Poprad*, services like the hotel, the fitness room, cryotherapy, and the restaurant are very important. Covid posts like information about the lockdown, reopening, restrictions and motivation in the pandemic era appeared on both platforms, however, it was more intense on Facebook (29 posts - 8.4%) than on Instagram (9 posts - 4.1%). The promotions and special offers, discounts were more typical on Facebook (48 posts - 13.9%) than on Instagram (12 posts - 5.5%). There were also posts related to a job position and the winter Olympic participation and the glory of the Slovakian hockey team on Facebook. The conclusion is that *AquaCity Poprad* is using Facebook and Instagram differently, the spa is uploading mainly photos on Facebook and Instagram, and the focus is on the spa and services of the spa, events of the spa and the life of the spa. Facebook is used as an information source which is why more announcements connected to the general operation can be read (Table 4).

In the case of *Alpentherme* photos are the most popular both on Facebook and Instagram. Around 12% of the posts are video content. Around 1% of the posts are GIFs. Considering the content of the posts, the scene, and the environment, the services are in focus on social media platforms. All in all, we can say that *Alpentherme* is using more Facebook than Instagram. The spa is uploading mainly photos on Facebook and Instagram, the focus is on the spa and the amazing environment (Table 4). The promotions and special offers, discounts were more typical on Facebook (14.7%) than on Instagram (6.2%).

In the case of *Thermenresort Loipersdorf* photos are popular both on Facebook and Instagram. Around 7-8% of the posts are video content. Less than 1% of the posts are GIFs. Considering the *content* of the posts, the scene, and the environment, the services are in focus on social media platforms. All in all, we can say that *Thermenresort Loipersdorf* is using Facebook more than Instagram, the spa is uploading mainly photos on Facebook and Instagram, and the focus is on the spa and the amazing environment.

Considering the content of the posts, the scene, and the environment, the promotions are in focus on social media platforms. The spa is uploading mainly photos on Facebook and Instagram, the focus is on the spa and the spectacular environment and great promotions. Covid-19 posts like information about the lockdown, reopening, restrictions and motivation in the pandemic era appeared on both platforms, however, it was more intense on Facebook (14.3%) than on Instagram (8.4%) (Table 4).

Table 4

Visual appeals and contents of social media posts

BL:  $n_{\text{social media}} = 1093$  posts,  $n_{\text{Facebook}} = 568$ ,  $n_{\text{Instagram}} = 525$

ACP:  $n_{\text{social media}} = 564$  posts,  $n_{\text{Facebook}} = 346$ ,  $n_{\text{Instagram}} = 218$

AT:  $n_{\text{social media}} = 307$  posts,  $n_{\text{Facebook}} = 232$ ,  $n_{\text{Instagram}} = 75$

LD:  $n_{\text{social media}} = 347$  posts,  $n_{\text{Facebook}} = 344$ ,  $n_{\text{Instagram}} = 3$

HS:  $n_{\text{social media}} = 228$  posts,  $n_{\text{Facebook}} = 126$ ,  $n_{\text{Instagram}} = 102$

	Facebook		Instagram	
	<i>Visual appeals</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Visual appeals</i>	<i>Content</i>
<b>BL</b>	Photo: 91.4% Video: 5.6% Gif: 0.7%	scene: 76.3% own products: 15.7% celebration: 3.2% research: 3.5% Covid-19: 0.9% promotion: 0.4%	Photo: 92.6% Video: 5.7% Gif: 1.0%	scene: 77.1% own products: 16.4% celebration: 2.9% research: 1.7% Covid-19: 1.3% promotion: 0.6%
<b>ACP</b>	Photo: 67.6% Video: 21.3%* Gif: 0.6%*	scene: 52.9% promotion: 13.9% services: 12.7% celebration: 9.5% Covid-19: 8.4% research: 2.0% other: 0.6%*	Photo: 65.6% Video: 31.7%* Gif: 2.8%*	scene: 71.6% celebration: 9.2% services: 7.8% promotion: 5.5% promotion: 4.6% Covid-19: 4.1% research: 1.8%*
<b>AT</b>	Photo: 86.1% Video: 12.2% Gif: 0.0%	service: 26.5% scene: 21.6% events: 15.1% promotion: 14.7% Covid-19: 11.8% job opportunity: 5.3% celebration: 4.5% research: 0.5%	Photo: 87.5% Video: 12.5% Gif: 1.2%	Covid-19: 38.8% service: 30.0% scene: 16.2% promotion: 6.2% events: 3.8% job opportunity: 3.8% celebration: 1.2%
<b>LD</b>	Photo: 64.6% Video: 7.7% Gif: 0.0%	scene: 33.3% service: 16.6% promotion: 10.9% celebration: 9.4% job opportunity: 8.9% Covid-19: 8.3% service: 7.7% research: 4.9%	Photo: 100% Video: 0% Gif: 0%	scene: 33.3% research: 33.3% promotion: 33.3%
<b>HS</b>	Photo: 78.9% Video: 16.4% Gif: 0.0%	scene: 35.9% celebration: 23.8% promotion: 13.5% Covid-19: 14.3% service: 3.2% service: 7.7% research: 1.6%	Photo: 81.6% Video: 18.4% Gif: 0.0%	scene: 54.7% celebration: 15.8% promotion: 12.6% Covid-19: 8.4% service: 7.4% research: 1.1%

\*illustrates significant connections

Source: Own research

Regarding the vividness of the social media content, we can conclude that the majority of images generating the most comments were taken from the spa and its surroundings. The marketers stuck to the

old recipe and used spectacular images to affect users' emotions and motivations, awakening the desire for post-reopening services. Surprisingly, only a minor portion of the communication was about the pandemic situation. In contrast with the expectations, the measures taken to prevent COVID-19 infections received very little attention from both marketers and users. Former studies (Zizka et al., 2021) highlighted the importance of posting positive, emotional messages and scenes or picture of life (Fecker et al., 2021) in times of crisis.

### 4.3. Activity of followers

The activity of the followers revealed that in the case of Blue Lagoon Iceland mean of the likes is much higher in the case of Instagram (1,752) than in the case of Facebook (910) (Table 5). The Mann-Whitney U test revealed that ( $z=-16.884$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) the activity of followers (number of reactions) was significantly higher for Instagram posts than for Facebook posts. For AquaCity Poprad 9.8% of the posts (4 Facebook posts, 55 Instagram posts) did not receive any likes or responses, but the mean of the likes is higher in the case of Instagram (421) than in the case of Facebook (59) (Table 5). The Mann-Whitney U test revealed that ( $z=-8.349$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) the followers were significantly more active on Instagram than on Facebook. Every post received likes or responses on Facebook and Instagram in the case of Alpentherme. The mean of the likes is much higher in the case of Instagram (66.945) than in the case of Facebook (34.514). The Mann-Whitney U test revealed that ( $z=-7.956$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) the followers' reactions were significantly higher for Instagram posts than for Facebook posts. In the case of Thermenresort Loiperdorf, the mean of the likes is much higher in the case of Instagram (205) than in the case of Facebook (92,097). The Mann-Whitney U test revealed that ( $z=-2.270$ ,  $p>0.000$ ) the activity of followers wasn't significantly different on both media. For Hungarospa the mean of the likes was much higher on Facebook (286.7969) than on Instagram (62.058). The Mann-Whitney U test revealed that ( $z=-6.923$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) the activity of followers (number of reactions) was significantly higher for Facebook posts than for Instagram posts.

Table 5

Univariate statistics considering social media reactions in the case of the selected spas

	Facebook					Instagram				
	<i>BL</i>	<i>ACP</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>LD</i>	<i>HS</i>	<i>BL</i>	<i>ACP</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>LD</i>	<i>HS</i>
<b>Mean</b>	909.91	58.40	34.51	92.097	286.7969	1,751.64	420.74	66.94	205	62.058
<b>Median</b>	510	27.50	25	51	146	1,386.50	126	65	176	52
<b>Mode</b>	2	6	9	17	36	0	0	36	125	35
<b>Std. dev.</b>	2,961.68	138.74	34.97	123.726	376.491	1,833.34	1,000.01	34	97.78	34.361
<b>Skewness</b>	17.69	11.46	3.86	3.263	2,963	5.46	5.05	0.76	1.217	1.591
<b>Kurtosis</b>	366.71	169.40	24.68	12.504	11,545	40.97	30.49	1.17	-	3.441
<b>Minimum</b>	0.00	0.00	4	1	14	0.00	0.00	16	125	12
<b>Maximum</b>	64,000	2,209	337	901	2471	19,416	8,093	191	314	205

Source: Own research

One post has received the highest number of likes, comments, and shares on Facebook in the case of Blue Lagoon Iceland. This was a video about the natural beauty of Blue Lagoon Iceland, the calm and amazing atmosphere. The most attractive one on Instagram was a photo of a product. For AquaCity Poprad the most appreciated post was about Valentine's Day on Instagram. Alpentherme's most liked post was about the new children's pool. This was a photo of the new children's outdoor pool. Thermenresort Loipersdorf obtained the most likes with its promotion about winning two nights for free. Only one post has received the highest number of likes and emojis and comments and shares on Facebook in the case of Hungarospa. This was a photo of the Hungarospa. Overall, the activity of followers is much higher in the

case of Blue Lagoon Iceland than in the case of other spas, but this could be explained by the international importance of the spa and the number of international tourists visiting the spa each year.

Considering the number of comments in the case of Blue Lagoon Iceland it can be stated that the average number of comments on each post is 84, but 10% of the posts (74 Facebook posts, 35 Instagram posts) did not receive any comments. The Mann-Whitney U test revealed that the activity of the followers was not significantly different in the case of the analysed social media platforms ( $z=-0.635$ ,  $p=0.525$ ). Considering the number of comments in the case of AquaCity Poprad, the average number of comments on each post is 11. The average number of comments in the case of Facebook is 13, and in the case of Instagram is 7. The Mann-Whitney U test revealed that ( $z=-1.388$ ,  $p=0.165$ ) the activity of followers was not significantly different in the case of the analysed social media platforms. Considering the number of comments in the case of Alpentherme it can be stated that 73.5% of the posts (196 Facebook posts, 43 Instagram posts) did not receive any comments. The average number of comments in the case of Facebook is 1.208, and in the case of Instagram is 0.9625. The Mann-Whitney U test cannot be performed on empty groups. Considering the average number of comments in the case of Loiprersdorf's Facebook is 12,866, and in the case of Instagram is 31. The Mann-Whitney U test cannot be interpreted due to the too few Instagram posts. For Hungarospa, 38% of the posts (25 Facebook posts, 63 Instagram posts) did not receive any comments. The average number of comments in the case of Facebook is 35.02, and in the case of Instagram is 5.98. See the detailed presentation in Table 6.

Table 6

Univariate statistics considering social media comments in the case of the selected spas

	Facebook					Instagram				
	<i>BL</i>	<i>ACP</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>LD</i>	<i>HS</i>	<i>BL</i>	<i>ACP</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>LD</i>	<i>HS</i>
<b>Mean</b>	49.10	12.92	1.20	12.86	35.02	121.69	6.51	0.96	31	5.98
<b>Median</b>	13	0	0	3	7	11	1.00	0	1	0
<b>Mode</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Std. dev.</b>	545.88	68.45	5.56	36.63	105.56	396.44	23.02	1.40	52.82	30.28
<b>Skewness</b>	23.63	9.08	11.56	7.95	5.05	4.33	5.52	1.59	1.73	5.80
<b>Kurtosis</b>	561.68	92.28	157.88	89.43	26.08	20.92	92.28	1.79	-	32.95
<b>Minimum</b>	0.00	0.00	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	0	0	0
<b>Maximum</b>	13,000	862	79	495	688	3.43	188	6	92	196

Source: Own research

We also analysed the content of the *comments*. Only 3.5% of the posts (20 posts) raised a debate among commenters on Facebook in the case of Blue Lagoon Iceland. They complain about the products, the social distance, the lockdown, the quality and the price of the services and food. Most of the commenters talk about the extremely expensive services, the loss of natural values, the crowd, the tourist attractions (too many people) and the litter, not loyal customers (people visiting once, but not regularly) and the disappointment due to the appealing photos (which are more appealing than in reality). Only 3.4% of the posts (18 posts) raised a debate among commenters on Instagram. They complain about the panorama from the new hotel, the use of cameras, the online purchasing, the conditions during Covid-19, the quarantine, the cancellation policy, the cash refunds (buy back allowances), the food services, the depth of the water, the increasing prices, the opening hours, and the travelling problems or sustainability aspects.

Only 3.8% of the posts (13 posts) raised a debate among commenters on Facebook in the case of AquaCity Poprad. They complain about the Covid-19 rules, the giveaway, the fake news, the contradicting information and the limited services due to the reconstruction, high prices or problems with online ticket purchasing.

No post raised debate among commenters on Facebook and Instagram in the case of Alpentherme.

In the case of Loipersdorf, only 4% of the posts (14 posts) raised a debate among commenters on Facebook. Not a single post raised negative emotions or a debate among commenters on Instagram.

At Hungarospa, only 11.7% of the posts (15 posts) raised a debate among commenters on Facebook in the case of Hungarospa. No single post raised a debate among commenters on Instagram.

#### 4.4. The use of hashtags

There was a significant difference between the number of hashtags. Blue Lagoon Iceland was using fewer hashtags on Facebook than on Instagram. However, 35.6% of the posts did not contain hashtags (67.3% on Facebook and 1.3% on Instagram). The maximum number of hashtags was five that were used on Facebook in case of 2 posts. Blue Lagoon Iceland was using the same hashtags on Facebook and Instagram, the name of the spa, the geographical location, the different services, the restaurant, and the treatments were mentioned as hashtags on both Instagram and Facebook. AquaCity Poprad was using much more hashtags on social media than Blue Lagoon Iceland. There was a significant difference between the number of hashtags ( $z=-10.977$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). AquaCity Poprad was using fewer hashtags on Facebook than on Instagram. However 37.2% of the posts did not contain hashtags (52.3% on Facebook and 13.3% on Instagram). The maximum number of hashtags was 28 that was used on Facebook in the case of 1 post ACP was using the same hashtags on Facebook and Instagram, the name of the spa, the geographical location, the different services, the hotel, the restaurant, and the fitness centre were mentioned as hashtags on both Instagram and Facebook. Alpentherme was using fewer hashtags on Instagram than on Facebook. However, 74.8% of the posts did not contain hashtags (98.4% on Facebook and 2.5% on Instagram). The maximum number of hashtags was 11 used on Instagram in the case of 55 posts. Alpentherme was using the same hashtags on Facebook and Instagram, the name of the spa, the geographical location, and the different services were mentioned as hashtags on both Instagram and Facebook. There was a significant difference between the number of hashtags. Thermenresort Loipersdorf was not using Instagram, since only 3 posts could be found, which did not contain any hashtags. The maximum number of hashtags ten that were used on Facebook in case of 1 post. Hungarospa is using fewer hashtags on Facebook than on Instagram. However, 51% of the posts did not contain hashtags (86.7% on Facebook and 6.8% on Instagram). The maximum number of hashtags was 23 that were used on Instagram in case of 1 post.

Hungarospa is using the same hashtags on Facebook and Instagram the name of the spa, the geographical location, and the different services, summer and Covid-19-related information like "HolidayAtHome", and "TogetherAgain" were mentioned as hashtags on Facebook. On Instagram, the spa was using English hashtags and was mainly related to the experiences and services like splash, summer vibes, and summer holidays. Figure 4 summarizes the most popular hashtags on Facebook and Instagram.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the most often used hashtags are geographical location. The market segmentation is very clear for Blue Lagoon. For the Facebook generation, in their communication the value-added services like silica treatments and the restaurant, while on Instagram the game is emphasized. This seems to be working well in convincing users to talk and follow and eventually use their services. Surprisingly, the other Spas did not distinguish much between the 2 social media channels. This could be a sign of a "stuck in the middle strategy" as if the market segmentation is ignored. They either ignored the differences between the 2 user groups, or they did not have any specialized offering for the different market segments. In the case of Loipersdorf, the choice of Facebook over Instagram could be the result of focusing on the older, financially solvent market segment.

Facebook



Source: Own research, n= 186 posts

Instagram

BL



Source: Own research, n= 518 posts

ACP



Source: Own research, n= 165 posts



Source: Own research, n= 189 posts

AT



Source: Own research, n= 13 posts



Source: Own research, n= 78 posts



**Figure 3. The TOP 10 hashtags used by the selected spas**

## 5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

More authors highlighted the importance of communication during the Covid-19 pandemic in the hotel industry (Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn, 2021). The present study analysed social media posts of internationally well-known spas between March 1, 2020, and February 28, 2022, a timeframe when the tourism industry was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Altogether 2,539 posts (1,616 Facebook, 923 Instagram) were analysed. The analysis was focusing on the posts': (i) channel (Facebook versus Instagram); (ii) vividness (media content); (iii) response rate by followers; and (iv) use of hashtags. The originality of the paper is that the spa industry was not analysed during the Covid-19 times and a longer period of time (2-year long duration) was analysed. Not only the content of the posts, but the frequency, and the response of the followers were also analysed.

Examining the four waves of the pandemic, we supplement the results of previous research. The social media communication of the examined spas differed significantly during the first wave. Blue Lagoon was consistently significantly more active than its peers. AquaCity Poprad's communication showed significant volatility, being extremely active during the season, while otherwise low. Loipersdorf's communication is moderately active, while that of the other two spas is low. In the second wave, Blue Lagoon still maintains a high level of communication activity, AquaCity Poprad continues to decrease, while the activity of the



other players is uniformly low. Based on the lessons learned from the first two waves, Blue Lagoon carried out strong communication to counter the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, while AquaCity Poprad did the same, but only focused on the season.

The third wave shows different strategies. Each actor's activity dropped significantly during the lockdown period, and they put minimal effort into their social media communications. Blue Lagoon started to communicate the fastest and most actively about the lifting of restrictions and the start of the season, but with only a moderate level of effort compared to the previous wave's effort level. Loipersdorf soon followed its example, while AquaCity Poprad returned to its previous habit and showed outstanding communication activity focusing on the season. By the fourth wave, in addition to the above, Alpentherme's communication became more intense. Hungarospa's activity on Facebook is negligible and an interesting new category has appeared in its communication, that it is looking for staff. Based on all of this, we formulated the following conclusions: (1) although the spas pursued very different communication strategies in the first and second waves of the pandemic, by the third and fourth waves these communication efforts converged, (2) the first, shorter closure has not yet significantly changed the spas' social media communication strategy, however, the longer lockdown caused all actors to minimize communication, (3) by the fourth wave of the pandemic, previously less active actors also increased their activity, (4) the ideal number of monthly Facebook and Instagram posts can be around 10-15 based on the practice of successful spas, (5) while significant seasonality can always be observed in the social media activity of individual spas, especially in the cases of AquaCity Poprad's Facebook and Hungarospa's Instagram activities.

In summary, we can conclude that Blue Lagoon Iceland was the most active and effective communicator in social media provoking three times more responses than the other 4 spas (Figure 4). Aquacity Poprad and Hungarospa were using Facebook and Instagram in a pretty similar way, considering the number of posts. However, the Slovakian spa was more active on social media. Loipersdorf was mainly using Facebook, probably because of the target audience. Nor Alpentherme was active on Instagram (Figure 5). The vividness of the content was scenes, life's scenes. Covid-19 messages like restrictions, motivations, preparation to reopening, and enthusiastic welcome back messages (Kwok et al, 2022) were not the focus of communication, nor in the first wave of the pandemic when there was the lockdown. The activity of followers was much higher in the case of Blue Lagoon Iceland than in the case of other spas, but this could be explained by the international importance of the spa and the number of international tourists visiting the spa each year. Spas were using more hashtags on Instagram than on Facebook.

The results have several implications. First, we revealed that environment and atmosphere are the most attractive means for producing user affection and need for spa and wellness treatments. Second, Facebook is the preferred channel for most marketers probably because it has a slightly older but solvent user base. Spa and wellness treatments are luxurious expenditures; hence the target customers must have the financial means to afford them. Younger users may likely have other needs and motivations when spending their incomes. Third, users' activity might be the subject of cultural differences. Although this is beyond the present study, the analysis of the relationship between nationality and demographics of active users could serve as a basis for follow-up research. Fourth, diversification enables the spas to offer tailored services. For example, the Blue Lagoon with its skin-care products and unique aesthetics can attract the high-end market, while Aquacity Poprad can attract families with its variety of services. The Hungarian spa seems to be stuck in the middle, its positioning is less clear hence its communication strategy is less effective compared to the international benchmarks. Promotions and giveaways provoked more activity from followers. However, the beautiful scene also raised engagement. The hashtags were preferred on Instagram over Facebook. ACP was using many hashtags. All, in all, the hashtags were related to geographical locations.

The results may also be useful for practitioners. There is a lot of pressure on marketers to develop an effective communication strategy because it is critical to creating demand for spa services or retaining

existing customers. The analysis helps them to see how important it is to clearly define the target customers and to tailor communication in line with their specific needs via visually affective images and video content. Because of the pandemic, the communication content is advised to go beyond the mere demonstration of services and reinforce the measures made by the business to ensure cleanliness and prevent the transmission of viruses. Although this needs to be confirmed by further research, we believe that more transparent communication (a higher % of the message about the epidemic measures) can help businesses to alleviate the fears and concerns of potential customers, therefore generating higher demand for their services.

Finally, the present research focused on the posts by major categories. The authors plan to continue the research with the analysis of the sub-themes in the future. Also, in-depth interviews with the social media managers of the analysed spas will be conducted in order to better understand their social media presence based on 5W's (Why, Who, What, Where, When).

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