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DMOs and Marketing Tools in Managing Overtourism and Destination Sustainability: North Macedonia–Japan Comparison

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Abstract: *A large number of tourist destinations around the world are facing the challenge of overtourism. The increasing challenges to the sustainability of tourist destinations require strategic intervention from Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and marketing tools to promote sustainable tourism.*

This study explores the role of DMOs and marketing tools in managing overtourism and promoting sustainable tourism development in North Macedonia and Japan emphases successes and challenges of both countries.

Findings indicate different strategic orientations between North Macedonian and Japanese DMOs. Despite the different approaches, both cases highlight the critical role of adaptive marketing. Promoting lesser-known attractions in order to distribute visitors will reduce pressure on popular locations. Involving local populations in decision-making processes, adequately informing tourists about responsible behavior and respect for local culture and the environment, will have a positive impact on addressing overtourism and the sustainability of the destination.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of tourism development affects economic development, cultural exchange, and revitalization of the tourist destination. However, the significant increase in tourist numbers, especially in culturally and environmentally sensitive destinations, leads to the phenomenon of overtourism - a situation where the number of visitors exceeds the capacity of the destination to sustainably manage them. Considering the fact that tourism is developing at a very fast pace, it is evident that the environment is exposed to great pressure and numerous risks. The greatest dangers arise from the continuous and gradual degradation of the environment, as a result of unplanned and unbalanced tourism management. As the challenges of overtourism intensify, the need for sustainable management of the destinations becomes increasingly urgent.

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) play a key role in balancing tourism growth with destination sustainability. In the context of future tourism development, it is imperative that stakeholders implement measures aimed at fostering higher levels of environmental awareness among tourists. Environmental protection has become a dominant factor influencing and shaping tourism demand, as tourists frequently identify pollution within destinations as a primary concern affecting their choice and satisfaction. DMOs, through strategic planning, coordination of stakeholders, visitor management and the use of innovative marketing tools, should contribute to the promotion of responsible tourism practices.

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This paper aims to explore and compare the role and effectiveness of tourism management organizations (DMOs) in North Macedonia and Japan - two countries with different tourism landscapes but a common challenge of sustainable destination management. While Japan has made significant progress in decentralizing tourism management through regional DMOs and adopting smart technologies to mitigate overtourism, North Macedonia is still in the early stages of developing structured destination management systems. By examining the functions of DMOs, stakeholder engagement models, and the use of marketing tools in both contexts, the paper highlights key lessons and suggests action strategies to improve sustainability outcomes for both new and established destinations.

2. DEFINITION OF OVERTOURISM AND CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Overtourism generally refers to the negative impact of tourism on the quality of life of the local population and on the experiences of tourists in a destination. An excessive number of tourists negatively affects the environment, the local communities, and the infrastructure of the destination: the destination does not have enough free accommodation capacities, there is an excessive load on the infrastructure, an uncontrolled destruction of the environment, economic imbalance, and tourists leave the destination with an unsatisfactory or bad tourist experience. When analyzing overtourism, it is necessary to take sustainability into account. When the costs exceed the benefits, tourism development is no longer sustainable, and interventions become necessary. (Santos-Rojo et al., 2023)

Sustainable tourism implies the application of the idea of sustainable development in the tourism sector – which means that tourism development should meet the current needs of tourists, while taking care to preserve resources for future generations, i.e. to meet their needs in the future. Although sustainable tourism can be considered as a form of sustainable development (i.e. development understood as a process), and as a tool for achieving such development (i.e. development as an end in itself) – there is still no direct connection between these two terms as one would expect. (Weaver, 2006)

The concept of sustainable tourism implies the necessary discovery of problems and the effort to identify appropriate solutions and strategies for their resolution, rather than passively observing the entire situation. It should also be emphasized the need to increase interest in assessing the increased demand for alternative and conventional tourism products that support the principle of sustainability.

3. THE ROLE OF DESTINATION MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS (DMOS)

World Tourism Organization (2019) defines DMO as "the leading organizational entity which may encompass the various authorities, stakeholders and professionals and facilitates partnerships towards a collective destination vision". As its name suggests, a DMO is the responsible body for destination management.

Destinations possess highly complex stakeholder systems (Fyall & Garrod, 2020, p. 165). In that sense, its management requires a comprehensive, holistic and systematic approach (Wang, 2011). While the traditional goal of destination management was competitiveness, in recent years it has become necessary to enhance the traveler experience while also promoting economic growth, conserving the natural environment and ensuring the well-being of the host community as well (Fyall & Garrod, 2020, p. 165). In other words, DMOs are expected to fulfill a comprehensive, holistic and systematic role.

The nine roles expected of a DMO, according to one of the initial yet comprehensive definitions of Wang (2011), are as follows: information provider, community brand builder, convener and facilitator, catalyst, advocate, organizer, funding agent, partner and team builder, and network management organization. While this describes the broad scope of a DMO's role, its marketing function has traditionally been emphasized. Several previous studies revealed that the main role of a DMO consists of fulfilling marketing and sales tasks (Bieger, 1998; Bieger et al., 2009).

However, several studies point out that DMOs need to address "non-growth" themes such as curbing carrying capacity rather than stimulating demand (Ritchie & Crouch, 2011; Klimek, 2013; Pike & Page, 2014). The DMO is responsible for raising awareness among the local population and encouraging a positive attitude towards tourists; additionally, it monitors the potential risks of overtourism and irritation (Mihalic & Kuščer, 2022). These new trends have been driven mainly by the expansion of the destination management concept described above.

Furthermore, the 'ambiguity' included in the overtourism, as a today's issue, may also have contributed to the diversified role of DMOs. As Dodds and Butler (2019) point out, the fundamental problem with overtourism stems not only from an increase in the number of tourists and more affordable travel options, but also from power imbalances, miscommunication, and gaps for strategic objectives among stakeholders. This means that the role of the DMO coordinator is growing in importance.

In conclusion, today's DMO must pay attention to the expanding concept of destination management, while also responding appropriately to the immediate challenge of overtourism. This requires DMOs to take on a more significant role than before, in terms of both philosophy and practice. To achieve this, digitalization may be crucial, as in other industries. Gretzel (2022) argues that DMOs must play a more proactive role in promoting smart tourism through digitalization and proposes the concept of a "Smart DMO". As Wang (2011) initially defined it, the role of DMOs has been relatively passive. However, DMOs must adopt a more proactive role in the future, incorporating advanced technologies to address multifaceted issues within destinations.

4. INNOVATIVE MARKETING TOOLS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MANAGEMENT

In a turbulent environment on the one hand, and increasing global tourist mobility on the other, DMOs are increasingly using innovative marketing tools to manage sustainable tourism development successfully.

To ensure better communication with tourists, DMOs have been using social media and digital marketing more intensively in recent years. Social media provide a great array of online venues for DMOs to distribute information and communicate with others. (Morrison, A., 2013)

In this way, they can timely inform tourists and promote lesser-known destinations, which will reduce the burden on well-known and attractive destinations. Taking into account the characteristics of overtourism, and to avoid or reduce the negative effects on the destination, DMOs have to create strategies for dispersing tourists and promote other less known attractive destinations, alternative types of tourism such as rural, gastronomic, etc., and activities that will extend the season (Milano et al., 2019; UNWTO, 2018; OECD, 2022).

Important for DMOs is to evaluate opportunities to brand or rebrand their destination. DMOs are required to analyze data and monitor tourists and visitors in order to coordinate their actions

in the future. This refers to the ability to predict demand, determine the effectiveness of marketing tools, as well as gain insights for successful planning and policy creation for the sustainable development of the destination.

In order for a tourist destination to be promoted as an attractive destination and to ensure sustainable tourism development, it is necessary to create a quality strategy for applying marketing tools with an integrated, adaptive and innovative approach. (Kotler et al., 2016)

5. CASE STUDY AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS – NORTH MACEDONIA AND JAPAN

This research uses a comparative case study methodology, analyzing the structure, functions and performance of DMOs in Japan and North Macedonia. The methodology is based on qualitative data collection and analysis. An analysis was made of various strategic documents and official tourism reports published in both countries, but also relevant academic literature was analyzed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourism experts, DMO representatives and local stakeholders in both countries to gather insights into the operation of DMOs, strategies for mitigating overtourism and the use of marketing tools, and field observations were made in specific destinations facing this problem. Finally, the findings were analyzed in order to identify similarities and differences in DMO governance structures and marketing approaches.

Japan demonstrates international best practices in terms of professionalizing and institutionalizing DMOs across the country, of data-driven governance, stakeholder integration, smart and sophisticated software based on the use of digital technologies and smart tourism tools, but needs deeper community engagement and equitable distribution of benefits. The practices in North Macedonia on the other hand, are not well developed. DMOs are not institutionalized, destination management is independently implemented in each destination and there is not a clear tourism management model.

North Macedonia in recent decades has positioned itself on the tourism market as a developing tourist destination in the Western Balkans. The tourism sector contributes significantly to the national economy, and cultural heritage, natural landscapes and lake tourism are the main attractions (State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2023).

Although it offers opportunities for the development of several types of tourism, such as ecotourism, adventure, religious, gastronomic, tourist arrivals are still concentrated seasonally (summer) and geographically (mainly Ohrid and Skopje), causing an unequal distribution of benefits and overcrowding in the high season in Ohrid, pressure on local infrastructure, lack of product diversification, weak visitor management systems, waste management problems, noise, endangering the ecological balance of Lake Ohrid, risks to the UNESCO heritage. Ohrid is under UNESCO protection for both natural and cultural heritage, but as a result of the inappropriate application of the UNESCO guidelines, the status of a UNESCO protected destination has been called into question.

These problems highlight the need for more sustainable destination management and strengthening institutional frameworks, which include finding ways to diversify tourism products beyond summer periods (festivals, winter city breaks), promoting alternative destinations (second choice destinations), visitor restrictions or time slot systems for sensitive sites, and stronger communication campaigns for sustainable tourism practices.

DMOs in North Macedonia operate locally and have weak competencies as a result of the centralized policy of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which also includes the Agency for Promotion

and Support of Tourism. Coordination of activities is at a low level, with inadequate mechanisms for managing visitors.

Even though North Macedonia is trying to intensify promotion (mostly on the international market), it still does not have adequate strategies for segmenting the tourism market. Monitoring tourist data is difficult as a result of incomplete statistics, unavailability, and limitations of data, which in turn causes poor feedback that should be used in further planning.

DMOs face overlapping responsibilities between ministries, agencies and municipalities and lack institutional capacity. Weak cooperation between the public and private sectors, and sometimes competition between different institutions, also pose serious obstacles. There are limitations in financing sustainable infrastructure and marketing campaigns, as funding sources often depend on public budgets, projects or donations, leading to instability. As a result of political influences, CSR decisions often depend on short-term political priorities rather than long-term strategies. Since CSRs, instead of sustainability indicators and measuring local population satisfaction, still rely on data on the number of tourists and overnight stays and lack legal or institutional mechanisms to introduce limits, quotas or new rules, they are in an inferior position to manage overtourism. Promotional campaigns such as "Timeless Macedonia", although effective in increasing visibility, have often prioritized quantity over quality for tourists (Mihajlovski, 2019).

There has been significant growth in the use of digital marketing and social media in the promotion of the tourist destinations, but there are still underdeveloped compared to global trends, because limited use of data analytics, segmentation and visitor flow tracking.

The lack of a clear tourism management model reduces the effectiveness of marketing and makes it difficult to balance promotion with sustainable visitor management. Municipalities often launch independent campaigns without alignment with the national strategy. Tourism clusters in Ohrid and other regions have attempted to coordinate private stakeholders, but with varying degrees of success.

The institutional framework for destination management remains underdeveloped, and DMOs are often limited in scope, funding, and expertise (Angelevska-Najdeska & Cickovska, 2021). Therefore, there is a growing need for capacity building, inter-agency cooperation, and the adoption of modern marketing to ensure the sustainability of its tourism assets.

Inadequate implementation of tourism policies, including compliance with environmental regulations, urban planning restrictions and non-compliance with UNESCO guidelines in Ohrid due to political or economic pressures, has a significant negative impact on the sustainability of the destination. Poor transport links, limited waste management and inadequate tourism services reduce the capacity to manage the large number of visitors as indicators of infrastructure constraints. Residents are very often excluded from tourism decision-making processes, leading to tensions and reduced support for tourism development. The destination also faces the problem of inadequate and insufficiently systematic data collection on visitor behavior, carrying capacity, or environmental impact.

Japan launched the "Visit Japan" campaign in 2003, which encouraged the development of inbound tourism. During that period, tourism in Japan has changed significantly and the country has positioned itself well in the international market. By 2019, Japan welcomed more than 31 million international visitors, compared to only 8.3 million in 2007 (Japan National Tourism Organization

[JNTO], 2020). This significant increase in the number of tourists, in addition to the increased economic benefits, has also caused problems in some destinations (Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, etc.) that have faced overtourism. Challenges include overcrowding of heritage sites, strain on local transport infrastructure, commodification of cultural assets, and increasing tensions between residents and tourists. This situation has prompted tourist destinations to change visitor management, imposing certain guidelines on tourist behavior, but at the same time, they have taken actions to create new tourism products and diversify them at different times of the year.

The Japan Tourism Organization (JTO) introduced the DMO Model Certification Program in Japan in 2015 with the aim of achieving systematic destination management. This initiative aimed to professionalize and institutionalize DMOs across the country, ensuring that they move beyond mere promotional bodies and become comprehensive management entities (Ishiguro, 2020). DMOs should be responsible for integrated management – planning, product development, marketing and data utilization, should develop destination management plans and coordinate stakeholders.

Japan has developed smart and sophisticated software based on the use of digital technologies and smart tourism tools for marketing activities. JNTO and regional DMOs use big data analytics, AI-driven platforms, and mobile applications to monitor visitor flows and alleviate congestion in over-visited areas. In order to reduce the effect of overtourism in destinations facing this problem, second-choice destinations are promoted where tourists are redirected. Marketing management in Japan is organized at multiple levels. National tourism policies are explicitly designed to be adapted at local levels, involving stakeholder participation from local governments, businesses, and resident groups in destination strategy formulation and implementation. (JTA, 2023; OECD, 2022)

Although Japan has achieved remarkable tourism development since the "Visit Japan" campaign, it still faces certain challenges in both urban and rural areas. In urban destinations, residents resist excessive tourism because they face noise, waste, and cultural erosion. In rural areas, problems with transportation accessibility and accommodation capacity limit the effectiveness of policies to disperse visitors (Pham et al., 2022). In the post-pandemic era, the alignment of economic goals with the principles of sustainable tourism continues to represent one of the most significant challenges in tourism planning and destination management.

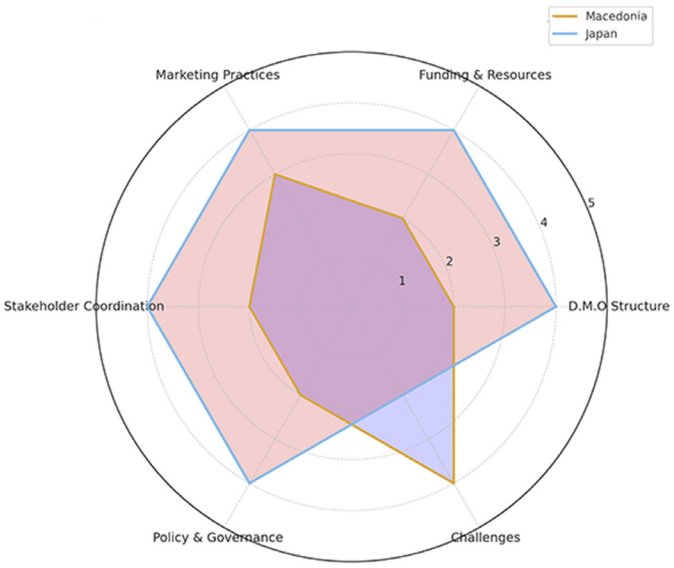


Figure 1. Comparison, structure and practices: North Macedonia vs. Japan

Source: Own calculations

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

To overcome and resolve the problems of overtourism in host countries and to address the sustainability of destinations and tourism, priority should be given to activities related to creating plans that will be applicable in practice. Strategic planning for sustainable tourism should include activities that will be implemented in both the short and medium term.

Short-term plans in North Macedonia should emphasize the importance of establishing local OAOs that will actively engage in planning, marketing, and visitor management in destinations facing problems with overtourism, such as Ohrid and the Skopje region. Digitalization and web analytics are also important short-term activities, as they will influence timely information about events taking place in the destination, and through social media campaigns to promote other less attractive destinations to disperse tourists and control tourism. Rules for the accommodation registry and STR should be implemented, which implies unifying licensing and monitoring, and implementing occupancy reporting to inform management.

Medium-term planning includes the creation of integrated destination plans (IDPs) that address the appropriate and correct combination of multiple modes of transport, control of water consumption and proper waste management, smart management of tourist movement, and, most importantly, care for the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. Creating diverse tourism products and encouraging the development of multiple types of selective tourism, such as cultural, health, gastronomic and mountain tourism, will positively affect both the sustainability of the destination and the control of overtourism.

Long-term plans should emphasize the introduction of measures to temporarily limit group visits to places that are overloaded at certain times of the year. The application of GSTC (sustainability criteria) when creating tourism development strategies in tourist destinations is a condition for success in the certification of the sustainability of the destination.

If the application plans are successfully and wisely created, then Ohrid can expect significant positive results. Namely, these are a reduction (up to 15%) of tourist density during the peak season in the old part of the city, an increase in Ohrid's visitation by up to 20% off season and an increase in average tourist spending by up to 25%. This will also affect the satisfaction of Ohrid's residents, as their involvement and support is expected to increase by as much as 70%, and the rate of compliance with licensed STRs will increase by approximately 90%.

Japan is creating plans (short-term, medium-term and long-term) to address overtourism and sustainability in priority destinations.

Short-term planning emphasizes micro-management, i.e. management by expanding "bon ton" zones, defining specific areas where photography is not allowed, and marking places where only residents are allowed to move. Special attention is also being paid to strengthening real-time messaging in Kyoto/Nara. Another short-term activity is the creation of a unified creative dissemination platform that local wildlife management organizations can localize, emphasizing the specificities of each destination.

Medium-term planning includes the creation of pilot projects to determine the number of visitors to certain attractions at a certain time. A certain quota of reservations is determined that can be made during the peak of certain events (such as the Snow Festival, the Cherry Festival), with the possibility of flexible pricing, which can affect the dispersion of demand. Activities to raise the importance of rural DMOs are also set as a goal in the medium-term plans. This will be achieved by conducting a

comprehensive analysis and creating creative services that small DMOs will offer, as well as applying methods to close the gap in capacity utilization through reservations and CRM.

Long-term activities aim to achieve the scaling up of GSTC certification for destinations and businesses, while integrating it into marketing and grant eligibility, thus respecting national green strategies. The application of the dividend model for the resident population refers to the allocation of a portion of the taxes that the destination collects from accommodation to implement joint projects with the neighborhood, for which annual social return reports should be shared.

The successful implementation of the plans will positively affect the increase in the dispersion coefficient of tourists and the actualization of less attractive destinations by about 25%, i.e. it will affect the reduction of tourist overcrowding in the monitored destinations by about 20%. As a result, the desire of tourists to visit the same destination again will increase by about 10%, and the satisfaction of the local population will increase by approximately 80%.

From the results of the research on: The Role of DMO and Marketing Tools for Managing Over Tourism and Destination Sustainability which was conducted in and forwarded, the following **recommendations** can be drawn for both countries:

Table 1. Recommendation for managing overtourism and destination sustainability

North Macedonia	**Japan**
Strengthen the capacity and mandate of DMOs at regional and local levels with clear responsibilities in marketing, visitor management and sustainability	Increasing community engagement in DMO
Integrate marketing with management	Strengthening local participation in decision-making in DMOs
Implement marketing aligned with UNESCO standards and environmental protection, especially for Ohrid	Promoting tourism products that emphasize local authenticity and cultural depth
Stable financing with public-private partnerships in tourism	Global leadership in sustainable tourism and application of advanced smart tourism tools
Prioritize higher value segments rather than number of tourists	Continuing efforts to attract high-value, long-stay visitors, rather than focusing primarily on numbers
Emphasis on quality over quantity	Deepening the "Quality over Quantity" strategy
Introduce digital systems for tracking tourists in destinations with overtourism (e.g. Ohrid)	Expanding the use of big data, AI-driven analytics, and real-time visitor management applications to optimize flows across regions
Disperse tourists towards second-choice destinations	Encouraging tourists to explore rural and less-visited prefectures through targeted campaigns
Support businesses implementing sustainable practices	Positioning Japan as a global model for sustainable tourism policy by exporting the Japanese DMO model and best practices internationally
Develop a unified national tourism brand with sustainability at its core	Strengthening cooperation with GSTC and integrating more certified sustainable destinations

Source: Own research

Both North Macedonia and Japan can benefit from the exchange of experiences and knowledge. Namely, North Macedonia can apply the lessons of Japan's multi-level DMO management, data-driven marketing, and visitor dispersion strategies. Japan, on the other hand, can analyze the challenges faced by North Macedonia, from which it will draw the conclusion that rapid growth without safeguards for destination management leads to overtourism and the problems that this phenomenon brings with it. This is another reason that emphasizes the need for Japan to remain committed to applying the maxim that it is better to put "quality over quantity."

7. CONCLUSION

The comparative study on the role of DMOs and marketing tools for the sustainable development of tourism and destinations in North Macedonia and Japan shows that DMOs and marketing tools play a crucial role in creating opportunities for destinations struggling with overtourism to cope and achieve long-term sustainability. North Macedonia, in particular, faces serious challenges, such as structural constraints, fragmented administration and the retention of traditional advertising practices, while Japan has a developed, higher-level integrated management model supported by marketing strategies and strong cooperation with the parties concerned.

The focus can be placed on three important aspects. Excessive tourism does not only refer to the large number of visitors, but the analysis must also take into account the adjustment of capacities and the design and implementation of tourism policy by the institutions. The strategic use of marketing tools will certainly have a positive impact on seasonal occupancy rates at tourist destinations, while at the same time promoting less-advertised destinations and influencing brand building in the area of sustainability. Finally, coordination between stakeholders (government, industry, and local communities) and the DMO will have an impact on economic benefits, taking into account the preservation of culture and the management of the natural environment.

North Macedonia can wisely apply the practices from Japan. The most important lesson is that the importance of DMOs should be emphasized, appropriate financing should be applied, and systems for digital marketing and visitor tracking should be implemented. Partnership cooperation between the private and public sectors should also be intensified, while emphasizing the sustainable development of tourism in destinations. All this is in order for North Macedonia to be able to transform excessive tourism from a challenge into an opportunity for sustainable growth.

Finally, the crucial role of DMOs and marketing is to ensure that tourist destinations are managed sustainably and that the goal is not simply to attract tourists. Applying the principles of sustainability when designing tourism policy guarantees that the destination remains competitive in the tourism market and that both the local population and tourists are taken into account. Cooperation between North Macedonia and Japan extends to collaboration in administration, innovations in marketing, and a strong commitment to balanced growth that takes resources into account.

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