

**II International Scientific Conference GCPMED 2019  
"Global Challenges and Prospects of the Modern Economic Development"**

**MEGA-EVENTS: DIGITALIZATION AND RESPONSES TO  
SOCIAL CHALLENGES IN TOURISM**

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***Abstract***

As a rule, the “legacy of a mega-event” means the collection of rebuilt buildings, roads and other structures and the improvement of local infrastructure. It is known that the organization of mega-events entails the intensive development of a number of industries and markets for a city, region and country. Preparations for mega-events triggered new social challenges in the industry. The expected reception of a large number of foreign tourists stimulated a new approach to the training of personnel and the key competencies of management and line personnel, primarily in the implementation of intercultural communications not only in verbal communication, but also in the design and presentation of tourist products and individual services. It should be also mentioned the search for new technological opportunities in tourism logistics, receiving and servicing tourists with religious and cultural assumptions. The development of the digital tourism economy from the FAN ID project to the search for new digital solutions in the presentation and promotion of tourism products of the regions was especially indicative. In the framework of this article, the authors made an attempt to focus on the study of the formation of a comfortable environment for fans and tourists during the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, as well as on the subsequent use of the received mostly “intangible” heritage in order to develop the digital tourism economy and to give answers to new social challenges.

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**Keywords:** Tourism, intercultural communication, social challenges, heritage, mega-event, digital economy.



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## 1. Introduction

Over the years there have been scientific studies about the influence of mega-events on the dynamics of the development of tourist destinations. Most of the tourists came to Russia for the first time to visited mega-events held in the country over the past five years. The emphasis on the 2018 FIFA World Cup for the study is justified by its special potential for the tourism industry. Since the events were organized in various cities, the guests received additional travel opportunities in Russia. It was necessary to use the potential of this tourist flow to create new experience and a variety of good impressions of Russian hospitality.

Modern works study the multiple effects of a mega-event, including economic and social characters (Sainaghi & Baggio, 2019). Many researchers share the view that the mega-events have a positive effect on the image and reputation of tourist destinations (Kirkup & Sutherland, 2017). The object of some studies is the choice of tourist products by visitors of mega-events (Lyu & Han, 2017), that proves that the latter has significant impact on the tourism economy. An important source of social challenges is the preparation of the local population for contacts with foreign tourists (Chen, 2016; Kruger & Heath, 2013). The quality of reception and direct communication with line personnel directly affects the emotions and impressions of tourists (Nordhorn, Scuttari, & Pechlaner, 2018) and further affects their loyalty (Phi, Thanh, & Viet, 2018). It is noted that it is social capital that acts as a success factor for destination marketing (Lee, 2015). In a number of cases, researchers study the targeted strengthening of the social significance of mega-events (Ziakas, 2016). The accuracy of marketing strategies, the correct implementation of intercultural communications in the policy of positioning and promoting tourist products and destinations (Jeuring, 2016) can enhance the effect of using the potential of mega-events for the development of tourism. Experts note even greater effectiveness is reached during integrating of marketing and managerial efforts in developing tourist destinations (Mackellar & Nisbet, 2017). Building network interaction of structural elements of the organizational mechanism is highly important (Song, Kim, & Choe, 2019).

The first task of the regional tourist administrations and heads of organizations of the tourism industry was to create a comfortable environment for fans and tourists while they were in Russia. Providing travelers with the feeling of a prepared long-awaited meeting was necessary for the creation of a positive perception of the country as a hospitable tourist destination. At the same time, there were issues regarding the selection of areas of work and tools for realizing this goal.

## 2. Problem Statement

An applied scientific and practical problem was the determination of the essence and elements of a “comfortable environment of stay” for tourists as well as the organizational mechanism for the formation of this environment. It was of most importance to take into account various behavioral characteristics of tourists, their needs, motives and interests. The key factors were the commitment of potential guests to digital communications and certain consumer preferences in accommodation, food, transport and other services. Multilingualism was obviously not sufficient for the quality reception and service of tourists from various segments. The array of tools of intercultural communication had to play a large part in the abovementioned

since tourists with a number of religious and cultural assumptions different from Russian traditions and ideas were expected to be part of the tourist flow. Moreover, the implementation of intercultural communication was to be carried out not only online in order to facilitate visa and other formalities for incoming tourists, but also in an off-line environment regarding receiving and servicing guests.

### **3. Research Questions**

The solution of this applied scientific and practical problem required answers to questions such as:

- What approach can be used when segmenting incoming tourist flow?
- What is the content of a comfortable environment of stay for foreign tourists from the main target segments?
  - What services, digital platforms, and service techniques faced new technological and social challenges? What result has been received?
  - What should be the conceptual provisions for the formation of a comfortable environment of stay for visitors of mega-events including foreign tourists?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of the study is to develop proposals for the definition and use of the legacy of ongoing mega-events for the development of the tourism sector, including in the context of further digitalization of the tourism economy and responses to social challenges in the industry.

### **5. Research Methods**

The following common research methods were used in this study: method of analysis and synthesis, method of deduction, method of generalization and grouping. The method of segmentation was used to answer the first question of the study. The methods of intercultural research were widely used in the process of research for this article:

- “Selective uncontrolled field observation” implied a purposeful and systematic fixation of various manifestations of the national psychological assumptions of people and it was used to collect primary data;
- The "method of interactive modeling", focused on the conscious reproduction of regularly occurring various individual and group situations of intercultural communication, it was also used to collect primary data by referring to the past experience of the participants and using it to assess practical communication situations in the present;
- The “self-assessment method” was used while conducting surveys of representatives of the tourism industry to highlight certain types of behavior in intercultural communication.

### **6. Findings**

It is relatively easy to forecast the directional markets when forming the aggregate of visitors and guests of a mega-event in contrast to the potential tourist flow of a season. On the example of the 2018 FIFA World Cup, one could see that the directional markets mainly consisted of a number of countries whose

tourists came to cheer for their teams. In this regard, as the study showed, behavioral segmentation is more accurate. The behavioral sign of segmentation, based on the example of the same mega-event, was based on the similarity of religious and national assumptions that determine the similarity of consumer behavior of expected tourists. The following segments were formed: tourists from countries where Islam is the main religion, tourists from Africa, tourists from South Korea, tourists from Japan, tourists from Latin America. Based on this segmentation, it became possible to determine the basic requirements for the composition of a comfortable environment of stay for foreign tourists from the main target segments, and these requirements were used in the design of products and service processes for target groups.

Reception and service of tourists from countries where the main religion is Islam (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia) are based on the priority of security issues, religious tolerance, favorable environmental conditions and political stability. The visitors from the indicated directional markets will highly appreciate the formation of the halal-friendly number of rooms as well as the catering in accordance with the principles of "Halal", etc. The reception and service of tourists from Africa (Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia) should be designed taking into account the special attitude to issues of racial and religious tolerance. It is inadmissible to use the word "black" or black color in relation to products or territories associated with Africa and in relation to the race of the guest in any information materials. Tourists from South Korea are sensitive to the balance of quality / price. On the example of the reception of Korean tourists, you can clearly show the features of intercultural communications and their importance. While serving Korean tourists, an unacceptable gesture is to call someone up with their palm facing up or to stick sticks in food. Japanese tourists demand a high level of comfort from accommodation, information services, while they agree to pay for comfort and accuracy. Japanese tourists are very sensitive to security and sanitation issues, the balance of the promised and provided service, and preferential rates. It is required to arrange Japanese speaking guides. These tourists have high requirements for observing the timing and tour program (for an organized trip). Services that allow them to plan a trip / excursion in advance will also be highly appreciated. Experts note that tourists from Central and South America (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay) are more likely to use tour operators, and they prefer to buy additional services from them. A more interesting type of relaxation is sightseeing tours with cultural and educational purpose. The average stay in Russia is 4-5 days, and tourists are in no hurry to catch everything on the route, they are ready to change the route and / or its duration. Often they order individual programs and do not mind eating in unusual interesting places. These tourists highly appreciate a clear logistic scheme of movement and a detailed description of the route and program.

The digitalization of the economy was also manifested in the tourism sector in multiply variations as the development of the presentation and distribution of digital content, the construction of online communications in the industry, and individual electronic services for tourists and sightseers (Korobeynikova, Ermoshkina, Kosilova, Sheptuhina, & Gromova, 2019). Booking systems, video and audio guides, electronic tours, tourist web-portals and other digital solutions have been already known. However, mega-events have provided a new impetus to the digitalization of the tourism sector, primarily in the development of digital integration solutions. It is no accident that the text of the Strategy for the Development of Tourism in the Russian Federation for the period up to 2035 announced the creation of a

tourist market place in order to centralize efforts to promote the tourist product of the Russian Federation. In addition to the federal level, the regional tourist administrations are also making active efforts to digitalize communications and services for tourists. Thus in 2020 Moscow plans to launch the Russpass intelligent digital platform service with services for tourists that will speak six languages and have a round-the-clock support service. The Moscow government together with the Ministry of Digital Development, Telecommunications and Mass Media of Russia have established the integration of a website and a mobile application for using various services by tourists for booking, visiting places of interest and building transport logistics schemes.

Along with the challenges of the digital economy, social challenges have been significant (Orekhova & Vodjanenko, 2019). On the one hand, the revival of folk art crafts, crafts and local industries allows creating an authentic product. On the other hand, integration into a tourist product, designing interesting content for target segments of tourist flow, receiving and servicing this tourist flow also create new requirements for staff regarding their training and competencies, organization of employment and designing professional trajectories in tourism in general. In the context of digitalization, when the impressions and attitude of a tourist, their opinion and assessment appear instantly and become available in their reference groups, it is personnel who becomes the most important competitive advantage not only of an individual organization, but also of the industry and destination as a whole.

Separate results of the study made it possible to determine the conceptual provisions for the formation of a comfortable environment of stay for visitors of mega-events including foreign tourists: safety and aesthetics, hospitality and courtesy, information support, quality information, efficient service, stability of a comfortable environment and quality of service.

**Safety and aesthetics.** The cleanliness and tidiness of all visible premises, territories, furnishings and equipment convinces the visitor regarding the safe sanitary condition of the tourism industry, the urban environment and transport hubs.

**Hospitality and courtesy.** These conceptual provisions convince visitors that they were expected, and they will be able to realize their desires regarding relaxation. Courtesy and hospitality to the fan and the tourist creates an atmosphere of comfort and security. The friendliness of the local population, of the police and of the urban environment will contribute to a high appreciation of hospitality.

Visitors expect effective communication and understanding of their needs from the staff. It is advisable to pay particular attention to the preparation for effective communication of the staff at the main points of communication between the visitors and the tourism industry of the city. The basic rules of hospitality regarding the particularities of receiving certain target groups should be familiar to representatives of all sectors of the tourism industry and the urban environment.

Tourist information support is another conceptual provision that means providing complete, relevant and structured information in a user-friendly interface. The implementation of this principle may imply the multilingualism of all tourist communications in the urban environment, tourist infrastructure, online solutions, as well as the high awareness of the staff of the main points of communication between the fans and the tourism industry of the city regarding possible questions and ways to fulfill the information requests of foreign visitors.

Efficient service means a quick, trouble-free and easy reception and serving the guest, creating a steady feeling of effortlessness. The staff that will be engaged in the service of the mega-event should quickly, clearly and fully answer typical questions like, how to get somewhere, what to see, what to do in emergency situations, how to purchase a SIM card, where to find this or that cuisine, how to exchange money funds etc.

The stability of a comfortable environment and the quality of service means that the specified level of hospitality and the quality of reception and service of the visitor must be observed every day for the entire period of the mega-event. Moreover, as practice shows, the proven algorithms and service processes with due stability of quality are effectively transferred subsequently to the current tourist and excursion services, the development of the urban environment and the improvement of territories.

## 7. Conclusion

Traditionally, the legacy of mega-events means the collection of constructed and restored facilities, new infrastructure solutions (in the field of transport, communications, housing and communal services). However, the study showed that mega-events also leave a combination of other achievements:

- new digital solutions are implemented, and then they are distributed to the domestic tourism market, or serve as the basis for subsequent developments in the field of digitalization and facilitation of various types of formalities;

- new elements of a comfortable tourist environment appear such as tourist navigation systems, the development of the urban environment and the improvement of public areas (parks, etc.), the organization of taxi services, and other transport logistics for tourist and other passengers;

- the service is further developing, technological innovations are created in the segments of the accommodation, catering, tourist and excursion services;

- segmentation is deepening and the use of intercultural communications is intensifying, special attention is paid to souvenir products and its packaging, to tourist trade services, to the hospitality bed availability and accommodation services, to public catering, to the implementation of payment and communication systems, to Internet access;

- professional personnel of different levels for various sectors of the tourism industry and volunteers are being trained, education programs for individual priority competencies are being implemented;

- work is intensified on designing new or updating existing tourism and excursion projects, products, programs; brand offers are being formed; local art crafts, crafts, specialties are being revived; incentives for the development of small business, youth and family entrepreneurship are emerging.

Thus, mega-event becomes a driver for the development of tourism. Proposals for identifying and using the legacy of mega-events to develop the tourism industry are based on the idea of preserving and integrating best practices, technological, digital and organizational solutions into the management and marketing practices of destinations and individual organizations of the tourism industry. The main task is to identify the components of such experience, to assess their relevance to current trends in tourism development as well as to consolidate and formalize. The most important areas of such work are:

- the formation of regional standards of hospitality at the level of destinations, individual tourist routes or companies;
- the formation of export standards for tourism services including the standards for the federal project “Export of services”;
- the development of friendly programs and projects as the basis for entering and expanding presence in the directional markets (for incoming tourism) and for developing the quality of service (for domestic tourism);
- integration into educational programs of secondary and higher vocational education in tourism, hotel business, catering, etc. regarding the content of the regional component.

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