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**Corresponding Author**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>Moscow, Russian Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td><a href="mailto:E.Booth@gre.ac.uk">E.Booth@gre.ac.uk</a></td>
</tr>
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**Author**

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<tr>
<th>Family Name</th>
<th>Kokkranikal</th>
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<td>Given Name</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:J.Kokkranikal@gre.ac.uk">J.Kokkranikal@gre.ac.uk</a></td>
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**Author**

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Tourism and its importance to the Russian Federation are very much in the headlines at present. Considering the huge investment made in facilities for the Winter Olympics, the building of new sports facilities for such mega events as the Football World Cup, and the status of St Petersburg as a candidate city for the 2028 Olympics, it is clear that Russia has long term plans to attract visitors to their sporting events. The purpose of this paper is to develop a research agenda to explore the potential of artistic gymnastics, a sport in which the Russian Federation has excelled for many years, as an agent of tourism development.

The paper will take a case study approach, considering the nature of fandom and identifying features of artistic gymnastics as cultural heritage and sports tourism product. The national and international environment within which it is set are examined, prior to the development of a research agenda. A detailed review of literature on the historic, current and emerging trends in Russian artistic gymnastics; the place of artistic gymnastics in tourism development and sports tourism in Russia will be carried out.

The paper’s findings will include considerations of:

- The nature of gymnastics fandom, both in Russia and internationally
- The nature of sports tourism development in the Russian Federation
- The nature of gymnastics as a sport and its competition cycle
- Artistic gymnastics as cultural heritage, and its potential as an autonomous means of promoting Russian national identity
- The relationship between Russia’s sometimes fading gymnastics competition results, and its potential to leverage the sport for tourism interest
- The potential for tourism product development linked to artistic gymnastics in the Russian Federation.

The paper contributes to the literature on the nature of sports tourism as it relates to artistic gymnastics in the Russian Federation in particular.

Keywords
Sports tourism - Artistic gymnastics - Russian Federation - Sport as a cultural form
Russian Artistic Gymnastics as a Sports Tourism Product: Some Observations and a Research Agenda

Elizabeth Booth, Jithendran Kokkranikal, and Olga Burukina

Abstract  Tourism and its importance to the Russian Federation are very much in the headlines at present. Considering the huge investment made in facilities for the Winter Olympics, the building of new sports facilities for such mega events as the Football World Cup, and the status of St Petersburg as a candidate city for the 2028 Olympics, it is clear that Russia has long term plans to attract visitors to their sporting events. The purpose of this paper is to develop a research agenda to explore the potential of artistic gymnastics, a sport in which the Russian Federation has excelled for many years, as an agent of tourism development.

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E. Booth (✉) • J. Kokkranikal • O. Burukina
Business Faculty, University of Greenwich, London, UK
Old Royal Naval College, Park Row, London SE2 0LS, UK
Economic and International Development, Moscow State Linguistic University, Moscow, Russian Federation
e-mail: E.Booth@gre.ac.uk; J.Kokkranikal@gre.ac.uk; O.Burukina@yahoo.com

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## 1 Artistic Gymnastics: Some Background

Artistic gymnastics (‘gymnastics’ in this paper) is one of the oldest Olympic sports. Its international regulatory body, the Federation Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG) was formed in 1881, and gymnastics competitions have been contested at every Olympic Games since the first modern Olympics in 1896. The sport is defined on a technical level as one of a group of sports with ‘stabilised kinematic structure of complicated coordination actions performed in relatively constant conditions without direct contact with opponents’ (Arkayev & Suchilin, 2004: 30), and is distinct from other sports in the wider gymnastics family, e.g. rhythmic gymnastics, trampolining and sports acrobatics. It shares the playful characteristic of all sport in that it can be practiced at non-competitive, recreational and elite levels. This paper will focus on the sport at the highest, elite level, as practiced by gymnasts in the Russian Federation and the former Soviet Union.

## 2 The Relationship Between Sports Tourism and Artistic Gymnastics

Sports tourism is not a new phenomenon. Travel associated with sports has a long history. The ancient Greeks travelled to take part in and watch Olympic Games. In the intervening centuries many cultures had examples of sporting events attracting participants and spectators, e.g. journeys to Shaolin Temple to learn, participate in and watch Kung Fu competitions in ancient China are well known. Sport and tourism are closely related and sport is one of the reasons why people travel (Gammon & Robinson, 1997). However, the travel associated with sports and sports as a tourism activity became an important theme within tourism literature only very recently. Sport and tourism were treated as separate areas (Glyptis, 1991; Hinch & Higham, 2001) and it was in the late 1980s and 1990s that attempts were made to explain the relationship between sport and tourism. Sports tourists are classified into various typologies based on the level of their involvement, and these range from competitive participation, non-competitive participation in recreational sports, spectating, accidental participation, organised and non-organised sports tours, vicarious participation and nostalgic visits to sites and museums associated with sports (Gibson, 1998; Hinch & Higham, 2001; Standeven & De Knop, 1999; Weed, 2009). Gammon and Robinson (1997) make a distinction between two forms
of sports tourism based on hard and soft participation, viz. sport tourism and tourism sport. Sport tourism involves sport as primary motivation and tourism sport is where sport is an incidental or secondary part of travel motivation (Gannon & Robinson, 1997).

Sport tourism is basically about holidays involving sporting activity either as a spectator or participant (Weed & Bull, 1998). Gibson (1998) defined sport tourism as ‘leisure-based travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home communities to participate in physical activities, to watch physical activities or to venerate attractions associated with physical activities’. Hinch and Higham (2001) present a three dimensional framework to explore the relationship between sport, space and time. The sport dimension focuses on sport as an attraction and characterises it to have its own rule structure, competition and playful nature. The playful nature of sport consists of notions of uncertainty of outcome and a sanctioned display of sporting acts (Hinch & Higham, 2001). Spatial dimension highlights the themes of location, region and landscape. The temporal dimension considers trip duration, seasonality and patterns of evolution of tourism destinations.

Sport represents a dynamic and increasingly prominent stage for the expression of culture (Hinch & Higham, 2004) and is an integral part of popular culture. Green and Chalip (1998) argue that participants in sport tend to share and celebrate a subculture associated with a particular sport. Commitment to a particular sport, distinguishing symbols and association with particular places are characteristics of sport cultures (Hinch & Higham, 2004). Green and Chalip (1998) state that the subculture of a sport gives its participants a sense of mutual understanding and the opportunity to adopt the attitudes, outlooks and values common to the sport, which become part of their identity. It offers them a common language, a topic of conversation and a basis of camaraderie. Unique cultural traits can be observed in most sporting activities, whether spectator, recreational or competitive. Examples include ritualistic patterns of behaviour of followers of European football clubs with chanting of club anthems during games, tribal affinity towards ‘their’ club, and the dressing up in the club’s colours on match days.

Artistic gymnastics challenges the boundaries of these definitions in that the opportunities for gymnastics followers to attend events are relatively limited. The ritualistic and other behaviours still exist in a virtual context via online communities known as the ‘gymernet’. The sport is also rich in cultural associations that could make it an ideal vehicle for conveying national cultural identity and promoting associated tourism motivations, especially within the Russian Federation where the sport has a long history of association with art forms such as ballet and circus.

Russian gymnastics attracts a dedicated following of young fans who amass as an international online community, and whose activities are mostly limited to social media. There is also a niche market of older followers who have a nostalgic interest in what has become known as the ‘Golden Years’ of the sport, during the Soviet era. The likelihood of either travelling to Russia for sports tourism purposes, or to other destinations to attend competitions, is not currently known.
Sport events can help form the image and add to the attractiveness of a destination for new markets and first-time visitors (Dimanche, 2003). The importance of destination image and its role on destination awareness and decision making process need not be overemphasised. Sporting events will not only attract new segments of visitor and can be used for branding the destination (Chalip & McGuirty, 2004).

This paper considers sports tourism not only as a form of visitation (primary sports tourism), but also in terms of a sport’s ability to raise consciousness of a destination and its cultural identity, hence triggering stages of purchase decision and possibly visitation (secondary sports tourism). It considers sport as a possible inspiration for tourism product development. The definition of tourism that is used in this paper goes beyond personal visitation into the realms of ‘digital’ tourism where the consumer engages with national culture through the medium of the internet and technology-based experiences.

In view of fan behaviour and the characteristics of the sport both internationally and in Russia, this paper will consider sports tourism definitions taking into account the importance of heritage, and the online behaviour of its followers as a form of digital or online sports tourism.

2.1 The Nature of Tourism Visitation Within Artistic Gymnastics

Top level artistic gymnastics has a relatively limited competition calendar, with international, supranational and national competitions taking place annually. The top competitors perform only a handful of times each year, e.g. in 2012 Japanese gymnast Kohei Uchimura appeared once internationally, at the Olympic Games. Competition rosters are often published as late as a week before a competition begins, so fans of particular personalities or teams cannot always be assured that ‘their’ teams or gymnasts will be present at any given competition, making it risky to plan overseas trips. Fans will therefore target competitions on the basis of locality or proximity to their residence, or by profile, choosing for example to attend a World Championships where the majority of the top competitors can usually be expected to attend.

In Russia, the opportunities to attend competitions are severely limited. Artistic gymnastics is not a popular sport and international competitions do not feature regularly on the calendar. National championships take place in the town of Penza, and while they often attract national press coverage attendance will be very poor. The 2014 national championships, for example, played to an almost completely empty stadium with parents, gymnasts and coaches making up the majority of the audience. Ticket sales are rarely advertised in advance.
2.2 Fan Behaviour, Vicarious Participation and Online Activity

Aficionados of Russian artistic gymnastics are a niche audience, as likely to travel to Stuttgart to spectate their sport as Moscow, despite any national leanings. Opportunities to travel to Russia as a primary sports tourist are limited to those who are intrepid enough to risk travelling to a distant destination without competition tickets on the off chance of gaining entry to one of the national or regional competitions, and to a very small number of overseas students studying sports coaching at Russian universities.

Perhaps as a result of the lack of spectating opportunities and the wide geographical spread of gymnastics aficionados, this niche community has collected around the internet (the ‘gymternet’). These aficionados consume gymnastics voraciously, mulling over the meaning of Russian language sports reports (few of them speak Russian) for every last crumb of information about their team, participating in long chats on social media (some of it in the Russian language), scanning Youtube for roughly shot videos of competition and training routines. Older fans hang around social media sites on the off chance of catching a hair of information about World Champions of the past, following their careers as national coaches and the like. Direct online contact can sometimes be made. The gymnastics coach has become a figure of interest, with 70 and 80 year old Soviet era coaches being tracked down for their opinions on technical, artistic and competition matters.

Most news of the current sport and stars originates in the Russian language press and is disseminated—rapidly—via a network of blogs, secret groups and other social networking sites. Opinion and discussion, in varying forms, takes place all year round on various gymnastics related matters. There is often fierce argument, some of it personal. Not all fans follow nationally delineated affiliations. The creation of imagery and video montages is a favourite activity of many of the younger online fans. Much of this behaviour is currently considered outside the boundaries of pure sports tourism visitation but because of the many unknown quantities of the fan base, and the low level of aspiration and management of the sport in the Russian Federation there is a need to investigate the various levels of involvement in the sport as a form of digital tourism. This digital behaviour might be considered as a form of fandom that precedes actual visitation or that can be part of the development of travel motivation in a wider context. Table 1 attempts to position current assumptions of fan behaviour within a framework of existing sports tourism definitions. Note the emergence of an online, digital sports tourism form. This form of tourism relates to the latent tourism potential of those fans who actively participate in international online sporting activities, but who have yet to translate their online participation into active competition attendance. Online sporting activities are thus considered in this paper as a possible precursor to travel behaviour.

While existing definitions focus on the behaviour of tourists and on sports tourism as visitation patterns, the nature of the sport form involved is not currently...
taken into account. The nature of gymnastics and its status within Russian and, formerly, Soviet culture is important to understand before we can really develop a view of how the sport as heritage can be developed for sports tourism.

3 Artistic Gymnastics as Russian Heritage

As a form of culture, sport is commodified for a range of reasons, which include their preservation, economic regeneration of destinations and profit generation. Commodification of culture occurs when cultural objects and activities come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their monetary value (Cohen, 1998). It involves turning culture into a commodity, which can be bought and sold (MacLeod, 2006). Tourism is an industry that draws its supply of products by commodifying cultural, built and natural resources. Imaginative commodification facilitates the transition from sport to sport tourism, leading to the popularisation of sporting events and regeneration of destination economies in the process. Marketing of places and tourism destinations involves turning them into attractive commodities for its customers. Professional sport is probably the most commercialised activity. It is commonly used to sell a wide range of consumer products, with successful sportsmen endorsing products ranging from expensive cars to consumer durables. Most sporting events are professionally organised to generate profit by maximising consumer spend. The economic potential of sport is often used as justification for investing in sporting infrastructure and mega sporting events. Sport as a cultural and tourism resource is commercialised by employing place marketing and experience marketing. While place marketing involves

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### Table 1 Application of Russian artistic gymnastics to sports tourism definitions

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<td>Domestic competitions, e.g. national championships, Russia Cup</td>
<td>Invited participants</td>
<td>Active competitive participation</td>
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<td>Podium training at national competitions</td>
<td>International online afficionados</td>
<td>Online streaming</td>
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<td>Tour of national training centre</td>
<td>International online afficionados</td>
<td>Online streaming</td>
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<td>Open days at national training centre</td>
<td>International/dominic afficionados (premium product)</td>
<td>Spectating/Online</td>
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<td>Tours of local gymnasiuems</td>
<td>International/dominic afficionados (premium product)</td>
<td>Spectating/Online</td>
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<td>‘Meet the Olympic champion’ events</td>
<td>International/dominic afficionados (premium product)</td>
<td>Nostalgic visit/Online</td>
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communicating selective images of places that appeal to and attract target audience, experience marketing involves adding value for customers by providing opportunities to participate and engage on physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual levels (Harrison-Hill & Chalip, 2005; Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Place marketing could be an effective way to commodify sports that are destination-based, e.g. golf and skiing. Commodification of sport by providing participatory opportunities is commonplace in sport tourism marketing (Harrison-Hill & Chalip, 2005). Given the range of participatory involvement in sport tourism, e.g. active, passive, vicarious, nostalgic (Gibson, 1998; Weed, 2009), experience marketing lends itself as a key method to commodify sport. Experiencing of sport is an integral part of its consumption and takes various forms from going through a programme booklet at a football match and paid opportunities to interact with sporting icons both past and present. Chalip (1992) proposed the use of multiple narratives, embedded genres and layered symbols to generate multiple meanings and enhanced audience engagement. Event augmentation through add-on activities and clever incorporation of narratives, genres and symbols in the pre- and post-event spectacles and festivals could amplify their experiential impact (Chalip, 2005; Green, 2001). A good example of this is the popularity of post-match parties that follow Indian Premier League cricket matches that are attended by cricket players. As Garcia (2001) states, provision of cultural programmes in the sporting context is yet another way to commodify sporting events and make them appealing to a wider range of market segments. However, selling sport and its culture as a tourism product can have major impacts on the authenticity of the sport and the destination community.

As a highly commoditised cultural activity, sport is influenced by the forces of globalisation. Globalisation is the process that leads to an ever-tightening network of connections that cut across national boundaries (Mowforth & Munt, 1998). It is a new way of looking at a global society which is interconnected through a web of political, economic, cultural and social relations. Globalisation was driven by economic, social, political and technological factors and tourism is both a driver and beneficiary of it. Globalisation, however, is considered to displace local culture with the global, leading to cultural homogenisation and cultural imperialism (Morley, 2006). Sport, as a globally popular form of recreational and entertainment activity has emerged as a major part of the globalisation process. For example, football’s English, Spanish, Italian and German leagues now have a global following, which is aided by the developments in communication technologies. Worldwide popularity of 20–20 and limited overs cricket matches is another example of sport taking advantage of possibilities offered by globalisation. This has resulted in homogenised sport culture in many sports (e.g. European football) and standardised stadia and sports fields along with global sport stars. Involvement of global media conglomerates and multi-national firms in funding and promoting hallmark sporting events such as Olympics and World Cup Football tournaments is evidence of how sport has become part of commercial globalisation. However, these global firms act in the self-interest of promoting their products through the commodification of sport. Further, globalisation of sport could also result in a trend towards the homogenisation of sports culture. The globalisation of sport has similarities with...
tourism. Through the process of globalisation tourism destinations are increasingly connected to their markets resulting in the creation of homogenous identikit destinations. Sport tourism thus is both a beneficiary and victim of globalisation, and the homogenisation of sport and its culture can act as a disincentive to travel for sport (Hinch & Higham, 2004). Retaining authenticity and identity in an era of globalisation will be a major challenge to sport and sport tourism.

The changing nature of gymnastics as a cultural form and its relationship to competition outcomes in the Russian Federation could provide a barrier to the sport’s potential to promote national character and identity, especially as a globalised form of the sport is now predominant in competition, with the US women and the Chinese and Japanese men in leadership positions. Examining the forces at work in the changing nature of the sport of gymnastics as a cultural form might help to understand how the sport has developed, and to identify the special features of gymnastics that have a clearly defined link to Russian culture and which can therefore be commodified to the benefit of tourism in the Russian Federation.

Palmer and Sellers (2009), explain that artistic gymnastics as a cultural form possesses several different features which are evident within the sport today:

- Strength
- Fluency of motion
- Influence of a balletic style
- Military heritage

The relative importance of each of these features is constantly changing, and is standardised according to the FIG (International Gymnastics Federation’s) Code of Points, which is recognised internationally as the means of judging the sport (Palmer & Sellers, 2009). Changes in competition forces and performance qualities influence the sport as a cultural form. Thus, the sport of gymnastics is constantly changing. As an aesthetic, it is vulnerable to the influence of a variety of values, attitudes and beliefs (Margolis, 1980). Making reference to Newton’s (1950) ‘Sieve of taste’ whereby new cultural approaches are filtered and may become established or rejected over time, Palmer (2003) argues that the relationship between gymnastic rules (the Code of Points), skill (the presentation and execution of exercises) and technicality (the purity of technique) results in a perceived aesthetic outcome, characteristic to individual countries. The influence of ballet is considered to have stemmed in particular from the Soviet school of gymnastics and, today, the Russian Federation has inherited the leadership of this artistic legacy. Soviet—today, Russian—women’s gymnastics training includes daily training at the ballet barre from an early age, bringing an emphasis on whole body choreography to all four of the disciplines on which they will eventually compete at senior level, and a similar level of detail in the men’s preparation. Elite international gymnasts can benefit from the attentions of professional classical dance choreographers in composing their floor routines, frequently drawing on Russian traditions of folk dance and circus for inspiration (Lisitskaya & Zaglada, 1987).

Russia’s approach to the sport reflects more than mere physicality or athleticism, embracing what is known in Russia as ‘physical culture’, a phenomenon that goes...
beyond mere games to embrace something aesthetic, close to the spiritual. The Soviet ethos of sport (‘Sportivnosti’) is characterised by Makoveeva (2002: 9) as ‘an aspiration to overcome the body’s limitations’, a dream ‘of spiritual flight, a release from the flesh’, with Kukushin and Andreeva (1983: 13) highlighting its importance to ‘all-round human development, which seeks to form personal qualities and facilitate the acquisition of useful skills’. With its emphasis on line, grace and inconceivable flight, and the incredible discipline and work ethic required of its practitioners, gymnastics could be considered to be a pure embodiment of ‘Sportivnosti’, providing the perfect mirror image of such qualities, with Soviet era press and publicity emphasising the impeccable personal characteristics of its athletes, the prodigious workloads demanded of them, and their frequently superhuman efforts in overcoming the physical effects of injury and exhaustion.

Gymnastics as a sporting form is thus congruent with both the dance and sporting philosophical traditions of Russia. Soviet sporting politics was such that for most of the forty years between 1952 and 1992, the Soviet Union had held the intellectual reins of the sport, strongly influencing the Code, and leaving behind a legacy of an aesthetic tradition which still survives within Russian gymnastics today, but which is inexorably dying out of the sport in general. Today, Russia’s ‘preoccupation with the beauty and delight of the game’ founded during the Thaw era of Cold War politics (Makoveeva, 2002: 22) and evidently somewhat at odds with traditional sporting values embraced by the West, has lost its grip on artistic gymnastics, a sport which now strongly favours the athletic to the artistic.

This shift in cultural form has been accompanied by a corresponding drift in competition results. The Soviet Union still retains its leading position in the medal rankings for the sport between 1896 and 2012 (total of 182 medals to their nearest contender, the USA, who have accumulated 101), and Russia now bears the flag as the leading ex-Soviet nation and since their first Olympic competition in 1996 have accumulated a total of 37 medals, putting them in an all-time position of 11th in the overall medal table. But relatively speaking their performance has waned, weakening the country’s identity associations with the sport amongst young followers who cannot remember the Soviet ‘golden era’. At the same time, loyal followers of Soviet era gymnastics still retain their fascination for the sport and remain sensitive to the special cultural associations of some of Russia’s gymnasts. Recollections of this era of gymnastics evoke a sense of nostalgia for a past time of aesthetic and graceful artistry. Online fans of the sport devour videos of routines during the so-called ‘Golden Era’, in particular the 1970s and 1980s, and there is an unlikely taste for Russian language documentaries even amongst those who do not even speak the language. There is an appetite for news of stars of the past, and a cult of personality surrounding many champions, and legendary coaches.

The emphasis of sports involvement in Russia has gradually changed since Soviet times. The Soviets valued sport for a variety of different purposes including international recognition and prestige (Riordan, 2007) and, following a period of time when sports were considered relatively less important, this emphasis continues today, and is supplemented by an interest in encouraging mega-event tourism to such events as the Winter Olympics, FA World Cup and Universiade. Putin wants...
to encourage medal-winning as well, and gymnastics benefits from significant sponsorship from the majority government-owned bank VTB. However, despite the construction of many world class training facilities across Russia, the legacy of the years of poor investment remain: coach retention and training, low participation levels and the poor associations of big-time sport during the Soviet era are all having an effect on standards of competitive performance.

4 The Level of Development of Sports Tourism in the Russian Federation

The Russian government’s attitude and approach to the development of sports tourism in Russia has changed significantly over recent years, as well as its attitude to Russia’s present and future. Unfortunately, the Russian Government’s strategies are not integrated into a holistic development or tourism strategy in Russia. The Federal Agency of Tourism’s Strategy of Tourism Development in the Russian Federation for the period 2008–2015 cannot be assessed as such, as it lacks a thorough vision.

Though much has been done in Sochi, under the aegis of the 2014 Winter Olympics, to develop a winter sports tourism destination and sports tourism venues, much less is being invested in the development of sports tourism in Russia today from the viewpoint of tourism support, including information leaflets, venue maps etc. Such publications were not published and distributed in Sochi in 2014. Vladimir Putin’s government has invested $50 billion in the Sochi Winter Olympic Games and in the development of 11 cities where the 2018 World Soccer Cup is to be held, with the logical expectation that medals will be won.

Baikov (2008) has identified a number of constraints hampering the development of inbound tourism in Russia today:

1. A lack of favourable information and the absence of advertising materials in foreign markets. The largest world tourist guide, World Travel Guide, depicts Russia as ‘unfavourable for tourism’—the only country with a negative image of the 200 countries described in the Guide.
2. The tourist infrastructure is not developed enough. The current availability of hotel stock is far below that needed to service demand. Besides hotels, most Russian cities lack up-to-date entertainment facilities and there are problems with worn-out roads and a lack of comfortable tourist transportation.
3. The unfavourable visa regime of the Russian Federation involves long and often complicated processes.
4. Problems with the level of tourism services and prices
5. Underdeveloped system of credit card payment in the Russian provinces.

Nevertheless, Russia has many strengths as a tourist destination, including its wealth and diversity of natural resources, the hospitality of its warm and open-
hearted people and its strength in both winter and summer sports. As far as sports tourism is concerned, there is significant potential for Russian athletes to win gold medals in 20 out of 37 Olympic sports. Russia has 52 Olympic reserve colleges, 984 Olympic reserve specialised sports schools and 3,831 children’s and youngsters’ sports schools. Figure skating and artistic gymnastics are two sports that are well supported by the government and where the medal potential is well recognised.

5 Method

A single, embedded, exploratory case study draws together secondary data from multiple documentary and archival sources in a convergent fashion in an attempt to triangulate (Yin, 2003). Research outcomes can only point in a general direction: all need further research to flesh out the details and to provide more certainty.

The data sources used include press reports from the Russian press and media, in translation, and from the English language specialist sporting press. The online historical archives of the gymnastics press such as Gymn-Forum, and Soviet TV documentaries available via Netfilms, the Russian TV and film archive, have also provided data about the Soviet system. The Russian Gymnastics Federation’s website provided some information on the level of development in the sport. Informal online discussions with a former coach of the Soviet Union team, a Soviet Olympic champion, and the CEO of a Russian sports marketing company, have provided some detailed insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet, Russian and American gymnastics systems. Social media has provided access to a variety of voices, positive and negative, on the Russian and globalised styles of gymnastics, with the author’s specialist blog, Rewriting Russian Gymnastics (RRG), and closed, specialist online forums such as The All Around, providing the focal point of an online community of experts and fans who express a multiplicity of opinion about the state of the sport today. The viewpoint of this research is that of a long-standing gymnastics afficianado who has followed Soviet and Russian gymnastics for the past 40 years.

Data sources are triangulated as a test of reliability and to flesh out the different perspectives expressed. Much of the data, including the interviews, have appeared in a prior format on RRG. Participant observation of fan behaviour online and at competitions also enabled assumptions to be drawn about the nature of the markets.
Delineating the nature of what can be investigated at the present time is challenging. There are multiple contexts within which the research can be set—(1) destination tourism to the Russian Federation (2) event tourism to gymnastics competitions (3) online fan behaviour as a form of digital tourism (4) gymnastics as cultural heritage (5) the heritage dimensions of gymnastics as a possible determinant in destination image formation. This paper can only provide an overview of possible research directions, which are given below.

6.1 Profiling the Motivations of Gymnastics Tourists

An understanding of the motivations of aficionados of artistic gymnastics is important not just for developing it as a sports tourism product, but also for developing an insight into the factors behind visitation, both virtual and real, to artistic gymnastics events. The niche of gymnastics tourists has not been researched or understood, which is important for developing artistic gymnastics as a tourist product and its marketing. The question of national affiliation and the relationship between cultural participation and an enjoyment of gymnastics as a motivating factor in attending gymnastics competition would be an essential baseline survey. Non-attendance surveys would also be necessary amongst the online ‘gymternet’ community and amongst attenders at other types of related cultural events e.g. dance festivals, circus.

6.2 Profiling Online Russian Gymnastics Fans and Their Behaviour

Today’s online fans could be tomorrow’s tourists. At least they represent a potentially significant target market of gymnastics tourism. An appreciation of these ‘digital tourists’, along with their motivations and behaviour patterns represent a great opportunity to tap into this market of potential gymnastic tourists. Also, important is to provide the digital tourists with opportunities to experience gymnastics in the virtual world and tap into potential opportunities. Researching the profile of the online fans, their background, motivations, intention to visit real gymnastics events represents an important area of research. A netnographic approach might contribute to the development of an understanding of how fans in Russia and elsewhere behave, with a view to considering how and if their behaviour leads to the development of a destination image and associated travel intentions.
6.3 Understanding the Nature of Gymnastics as a Cultural Form

Sports have become a global phenomenon and most of them have their own common language and culture which is shared and understood by followers of different sports. However, sports also remain distinctly local and have their unique identity and fandom, who share it and sometime create new forms of culture and politics. It would be fascinating to research and understand the identity, culture and politics surrounding artistic gymnastics. A major question in this context is, to what extent have changes in the sport influenced its shape as a cultural form and hence its propensity to promote destination image for Russia?

6.4 The Commodification of Artistic Gymnastics

Sports, like various forms of culture, are commercialised to make them more accessible, ensure their commercial viability and to find resources for their development. Developing sport as a tourism product invariably involves its commodification. Identifying the barriers to commodification of gymnastics in the Russian Federation for either commercial or tourism purposes from social, economic, cultural and political perspectives is an important area to research, with the aim of considering key product development opportunities for gymnastics tourism to the Russian Federation including but not limited to tours, memberships, and online affiliations.

In view of the ever changing identity of gymnastics, the issue of the authentic representation of the Russian national character may have an influence on how the sport can be marketed as a tourism product. Important too is to examine the impacts of commodification of gymnastics on its aficionados.

6.5 Artistic Gymnastics as an Agent in the Formation of Russian National Identity and Destination Image

Understanding the processes by which national identity is formed and how artistic gymnastics, along with other cultural forms, can contribute to this formation will be a precursor to considering issues of positioning and branding and in developing models of sport heritage branding.

Artistic gymnastics with its artistry and sophistication could be a powerful means for forming an attractive image to both existing and emerging tourist destinations in Russia. The potential of artistic gymnastics to form or modify the image of tourist destination in Russia and the type of images that are likely to be attributed to artistic gymnastics represent an research opportunity that is valuable to...
the literature on sports and tourism marketing. Allied to this theme is the examination of the current image of tourist destinations in Russia and issues of image gap and the chain of influence in tourism destination image of Russia (Kokkranikal, Cronje, & Butler, 2011).

6.6 Issues and Challenges in Sports Tourism Development in Russia

Russian tourism is still in its development stage (Butler, 1980). Infrastructure and management resources play a vital role in the development of sport heritage tourism. Issues such as infrastructure development, visitor management, stakeholder participation and funding for developing sport heritage tourism within the context of gymnastics are worth studying to understand the dynamics of tourism development in Russia.

Russia has a rich heritage of sports and has a tradition of being a sporting superpower. With a wide range of tourism resources, which range from a rich cultural heritage to a variety of natural features, Russia has tremendous potential as a tourist destination. However, very limited or no research has been carried out on tourism in general and sports tourism development in particular in Russia. The study on artistic gymnastics provides an opportunity to expand the scope of research into the current state of sports tourism in Russia and challenges it faces. The following themes related to sports tourism development in Russia require more research and deeper understanding: policy environment of sports tourism, organisational requirements and complexities of sports tourism marketing. This list can be expanded to include human resource issues, the role of government and private sector, the role of relationship marketing in sports tourism; strategic issues such quality and innovation, and experiential and behavioural aspects of sports tourism.

6.7 Conceptual Issues Surrounding Sports Tourism

- Definitional issues. The current definitional frameworks need some consideration in light of the emergence of the ‘digital’ sports fan and the relationship online behaviour might have to patterns of visitation.
- Relationship marketing. Where there is a dedicated niche following of a sport it might be worth exploring a relationship marketing approach to the transformation of online behaviour to physical visitation. The potential of sports memberships may be worth investigation.
7 Conclusions

Sports tourism in the Russian Federation is currently focussed on the staging of mega events and its associated benefits. This paper considers sports heritage tourism and a variant, online form of sports tourism as a means of encouraging the formation of destination image and providing the pre-requisites for the development of a variety of Russian gymnastics tourism product. At present, tourism is in a development stage in Russia and there is also little understanding of the appeal of gymnastics and its potential as a sports tourism product. The rich cultural associations of Russian gymnastics make it a rich field for the collection of data that may contribute to understandings of sport as a cultural form, its potential for tourism commodification, branding and product development.

References


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