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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.

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

(separated by '-')

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

AU1

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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31 to artistic gymnastics in the Russian Federation in particular.

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33 cultural form

34 1 Artistic Gymnastics: Some Background

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

47 2 The Relationship Between Sports Tourism and Artistic 48 Gymnastics

49 Sports tourism is not a new phenomenon. Travel associated with sports has a long
50 history. The ancient Greeks travelled to take part in and watch Olympic Games. In
51 the intervening centuries many cultures had examples of sporting events attracting
52 participants and spectators, e.g. journeys to Shaolin Temple to learn, participate in
53 and watch Kung Fu competitions in ancient China are well known. Sport and
54 tourism are closely related and sport is one of the reasons why people travel
55 (Gammon & Robinson, 1997). However, the travel associated with sports and
56 sports as a tourism activity became an important theme within tourism literature
57 only very recently. Sport and tourism were treated as separate areas (Glyptis, 1991;
58 Hinch & Higham, 2001) and it was in the late 1980s and 1990s that attempts were
59 made to explain the relationship between sport and tourism. Sports tourists are
60 classified into various typologies based on the level of their involvement, and these
61 range from competitive participation, non-competitive participation in recreational
62 sports, spectating, accidental participation, organised and non-organised sports
63 tours, vicarious participation and nostalgic visits to sites and museums associated
64 with sports (Gibson, 1998; Hinch & Higham, 2001; Standeven & De Knop, 1999;
65 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 66
tourism sport. Sport tourism involves sport as primary motivation and tourism 67
sport is where sport is an incidental or secondary part of travel motivation (Gam- 68
mon & Robinson, 1997). 69

Sport tourism is basically about holidays involving sporting activity either as a 70
spectator or participant (Weed & Bull, 1998). Gibson (1998) defined sport tourism 71 AU2
as 'leisure-based travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home 72
communities to participate in physical activities, to watch physical activities or to 73
venerate attractions associated with physical activities'. Hinch and Higham (2001) 74
present a three dimensional framework to explore the relationship between sport, 75
space and time. The sport dimension focuses on sport as an attraction and 76
characterises it to have its own rule structure, competition and playful nature. The 77
playful nature of sport consists of notions of uncertainty of outcome and a sanc- 78
tioned display of sporting acts (Hinch & Higham, 2001). Spatial dimension high- 79
lights the themes of location, region and landscape. The temporal dimension 80
considers trip duration, seasonality and patterns of evolution of tourism 81
destinations. 82

Sport represents a dynamic and increasingly prominent stage for the expression 83
of culture (Hinch & Higham, 2004) and is an integral part of popular culture. Green 84
and Chalip (1998) argue that participants in sport tend to share and celebrate a 85
subculture associated with a particular sport. Commitment to a particular sport, 86
distinguishing symbols and association with particular places are characteristics of 87
sport cultures (Hinch & Higham, 2004). Green and Chalip (1998) state that the 88
subculture of a sport gives its participants a sense of mutual understanding and the 89
opportunity to adopt the attitudes, outlooks and values common to the sport, which 90
become part of their identity. It offers them a common language, a topic of 91
conversation and a basis of camaraderie. Unique cultural traits can be observed in 92
most sporting activities, whether spectator, recreational or competitive. Examples 93
include ritualistic patterns of behaviour of followers of European football clubs 94
with chanting of club anthems during games, tribal affinity towards 'their' club, and 95
the dressing up in the club's colours on match days. 96

Artistic gymnastics challenges the boundaries of these definitions in that the 97
opportunities for gymnastics followers to attend events are relatively limited. The 98
ritualistic and other behaviours still exist in a virtual context via online communi- 99
ties known as the 'gymternet'. The sport is also rich in cultural associations that 100
could make it an ideal vehicle for conveying national cultural identity and promot- 101
ing associated tourism motivations, especially within the Russian Federation where 102
the sport has a long history of association with art forms such as ballet and circus. 103

Russian gymnastics attracts a dedicated following of young fans who amass as 104
an international online community, and whose activities are mostly limited to social 105
media. There is also a niche market of older followers who have a nostalgic interest 106
in what has become known as the 'Golden Years' of the sport, during the Soviet era. 107
The likelihood of either travelling to Russia for sports tourism purposes, or to other 108
destinations to attend competitions, is not currently known. 109

110 Sport events can help form the image and add to the attractiveness of a destina-
111 tion for new markets and first-time visitors (Dimanche, 2003). The importance of
112 destination image and its role on destination awareness and decision making
113 process need not be overemphasised. Sporting events will not only attract new
114 segments of visitor and can be used for branding the destination (Chalip &
115 McGuirty, 2004).

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

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

128 **2.1 *The Nature of Tourism Visitation Within Artistic*** 129 ***Gymnastics***

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

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

2.2 *Fan Behaviour, Vicarious Participation and Online Activity*

148

149

Aficianados of Russian artistic gymnastics are a niche audience, as likely to travel 150 to Stuttgart to spectate their sport as Moscow, despite any national leanings. 151 Opportunities to travel to Russia as a primary sports tourist are limited to those 152 who are intrepid enough to risk travelling to a distant destination without competi- 153 tion tickets on the off chance of gaining entry to one of the national or regional 154 competitions, and to a very small number of overseas students studying sports 155 coaching at Russian universities. 156

Perhaps as a result of the lack of spectating opportunities and the wide geo- 157 graphical spread of gymnastics aficianados, this niche community has collected 158 around the internet (the 'gymternet'). These aficianados consume gymnastics 159 voraciously, mulling over the meaning of Russian language sports reports (few of 160 them speak Russian) for every last crumb of information about their team, partici- 161 pating in long chats on social media (some of it in the Russian language), scanning 162 Youtube for roughly shot videos of competition and training routines. Older fans 163 hang around social media sites on the off chance of catching a hair of information 164 about World Champions of the past, following their careers as national coaches and 165 the like. Direct online contact can sometimes be made. The gymnastics coach has 166 become a figure of interest, with 70 and 80 year old Soviet era coaches being 167 tracked down for their opinions on technical, artistic and competition matters. 168

Most news of the current sport and stars originates in the Russian language press 169 and is disseminated—rapidly—via a network of blogs, secret groups and other 170 social networking sites. Opinion and discussion, in varying forms, takes place all 171 year round on various gymnastics related matters. There is often fierce argument, 172 some of it personal. Not all fans follow nationally delineated affiliations. The 173 creation of imagery and video montages is a favourite activity of many of the 174 younger online fans. Much of this behaviour is currently considered outside the 175 boundaries of pure sports tourism visitation but because of the many unknown 176 quantities of the fan base, and the low level of aspiration and management of the 177 sport in the Russian Federation there is a need to investigate the various levels of 178 involvement in the sport as a form of digital tourism. This digital behaviour might 179 be considered as a form of fandom that precedes actual visitation or that can be part 180 of the development of travel motivation in a wider context. Table 1 attempts to 181 position current assumptions of fan behaviour within a framework of existing sports 182 tourism definitions. Note the emergence of an online, digital sports tourism form. 183 This form of tourism relates to the latent tourism potential of those fans who 184 actively participate in international online sporting activities, but who have yet to 185 translate their online participation into active competition attendance. Online sport- 186 ing activities are thus considered in this paper as a possible precursor to travel 187 behaviour. 188

While existing definitions focus on the behaviour of tourists and on sports 189 tourism as visitation patterns, the nature of the sport form involved is not currently 190

t.1 **Table 1** Application of Russian artistic gymnastics to sports tourism definitions

t.2	Event	Target segment	Form of participation	Form of sports tourism
t.3	Domestic competitions, e.g. national championships, Russia Cup	Invited participants	Active competitive participation	Active competitive and participatory
t.4	Podium training at national competitions	International online aficionados	Online streaming	<i>Digital sports tourism</i>
t.5	Tour of national training centre	International online aficionados	Online streaming	<i>Digital sports tourism</i>
t.6	Open days at national training centre	International/domestic aficionados (premium product)	Spectating/ <i>Online</i>	Organised sports tour/ <i>Digital sports tourism</i>
t.7	Tours of local gymnasiums	International/domestic aficionados (premium product)	Spectating/ <i>Online</i>	Organised sports tour/ <i>Digital sports tourism</i>
t.8	'Meet the Olympic champion' events	International/domestic aficionados (premium product)	Nostalgic visit/ <i>Online</i>	Organised sports tour/ <i>Digital sports tourism</i>

191 taken into account. The nature of gymnastics and its status within Russian and,
 192 formerly, Soviet culture is important to understand before we can really develop a
 193 view of how the sport as heritage can be developed for sports tourism.

194 **3 Artistic Gymnastics as Russian Heritage**

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

211 Sport as a cultural and tourism resource is commercialised by employing place
 212 marketing and experience marketing. While place marketing involves

communicating selective images of places that appeal to and attract target audience, 213
experience marketing involves adding value for customers by providing opportu- 214
nities to participate and engage on physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual 215
levels (Harrison-Hill & Chalip, 2005; Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Place marketing 216
could be an effective way to commodify sports that are destination-based, e.g. golf 217
and skiing. Commodification of sport by providing participatory opportunities is 218
commonplace in sport tourism marketing (Harrison-Hill & Chalip, 2005). Given 219
the range of participatory involvement in sport tourism, e.g. active, passive, vicar- 220
ious, nostalgic (Gibson, 1998; Weed, 2009), experience marketing lends itself as a 221
key method to commodify sport. Experiencing of sport is an integral part of its 222
consumption and takes various forms from going through a programme booklet at a 223
football match and paid opportunities to interact with sporting icons both past and 224
present. Chalip (1992) proposed the use of multiple narratives, embedded genres 225
and layered symbols to generate multiple meanings and enhanced audience engage- 226
ment. Event augmentation through add-on activities and clever incorporation of 227
narratives, genres and symbols in the pre- and post-event spectacles and festivals 228
could amplify their experiential impact (Chalip, 2005; Green, 2001). A good 229
example of this is the popularity of post-match parties that follow Indian Premier 230
League cricket matches that are attended by cricket players. As García (2001) 231
states, provision of cultural programmes in the sporting context is yet another 232
way to commodify sporting events and make them appealing to a wider range of 233
market segments. However, selling sport and its culture as a tourism product can 234
have major impacts on the authenticity of the sport and the destination community. 235

As a highly commoditised cultural activity, sport is influenced by the forces of 236
globalisation. Globalisation is the process that leads to an ever-tightening network 237
of connections that cut across national boundaries (Mowforth & Munt, 1998). It is a 238
new way of looking at a global society which is interconnected through a web of 239
political, economic, cultural and social relations. Globalisation was driven by 240
economic, social, political and technological factors and tourism is both a driver 241
and beneficiary of it. Globalisation, however, is considered to displace local culture 242
with the global, leading to cultural homogenisation and cultural imperialism (Mor- 243
ley, 2006). Sport, as a globally popular form of recreational and entertainment 244
activity has emerged as a major part of the globalisation process. For example, 245
football's English, Spanish, Italian and German leagues now have a global follow- 246
ing, which is aided by the developments in communication technologies. World- 247
wide popularity of 20–20 and limited overs cricket matches is another example of 248
sport taking advantage of possibilities offered by globalisation. This has resulted in 249
homogenised sport culture in many sports (e.g. European football) and standardised 250
stadia and sports fields along with global sport stars. Involvement of global media 251
conglomerates and multi-national firms in funding and promoting hallmark sporting 252
events such as Olympics and World Cup Football tournaments is evidence of how 253
sport has become part of commercial globalisation. However, these global firms act 254
in the self-interest of promoting their products through the commodification of 255
sport. Further, globalisation of sport could also result in a trend towards the 256
homogenisation of sports culture. The globalisation of sport has similarities with 257

258 tourism. Through the process of globalisation tourism destinations are increasingly
259 connected to their markets resulting in the creation of homogenous identikit
260 destinations. Sport tourism thus is both a beneficiary and victim of globalisation,
261 and the homogenisation of sport and its culture can act as a disincentive to travel for
262 sport (Hinch & Higham, 2004). Retaining authenticity and identity in an era of
263 globalisation will be a major challenge to sport and sport tourism.

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

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

- 275 • Strength
- 276 • Fluency of motion
- 277 • Influence of a balletic style
- 278 • Military heritage

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

300 Russia's approach to the sport reflects more than mere physicality or athleticism,
301 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 super-human 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

347 to encourage medal-winning as well, and gymnastics benefits from significant
348 sponsorship from the majority government-owned bank VTB. However, despite
349 the construction of many world class training facilities across Russia, the legacy of
350 the years of poor investment remain: coach retention and training, low participation
351 levels and the poor associations of big-time sport during the Soviet era are all
352 having an effect on standards of competitive performance.

353 **4 The Level of Development of Sports Tourism** 354 **in the Russian Federation**

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

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

370 Baikov (2008) has identified a number of constraints hampering the develop-
371 ment of inbound tourism in Russia today:

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

384 Nevertheless, Russia has many strengths as a tourist destination, including its
385 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 386
tourism is concerned, there is significant potential for Russian athletes to win gold 387
medals in 20 out of 37 Olympic sports. Russia has 52 Olympic reserve colleges, 388
984 Olympic reserve specialised sports schools and 3,831 children's and young- 389
sters' sports schools. Figure skating and artistic gymnastics are two sports that are 390
well supported by the government and where the medal potential is well recognised. 391

5 Method

392

A single, embedded, exploratory case study draws together secondary data from 393
multiple documentary and archival sources in a convergent fashion in an attempt to 394
triangulate (Yin, 2003). Research outcomes can only point in a general direction: all 395
need further research to flesh out the details and to provide more certainty. 396

The data sources used include press reports from the Russian press and media, in 397
translation, and from the English language specialist sporting press. The online 398
historical archives of the gymnastics press such as Gymn-Forum, and Soviet TV 399
documentaries available via Netfilms, the Russian TV and film archive, have also 400
provided data about the Soviet system. The Russian Gymnastics Federation's 401
website provided some information on the level of development in the sport. 402
Informal online discussions with a former coach of the Soviet Union team, a Soviet 403
Olympic champion, and the CEO of a Russian sports marketing company, have 404
provided some detailed insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet, 405
Russian and American gymnastics systems. Social media has provided access to a 406
variety of voices, positive and negative, on the Russian and globalised styles of 407
gymnastics, with the author's specialist blog, *Rewriting Russian Gymnastics* 408
(*RRG*), and closed, specialist online forums such as The All Around, providing 409
the focal point of an online community of experts and fans who express a multi- 410
plicity of opinion about the state of the sport today. The viewpoint of this research is 411
that of a long-standing gymnastics aficionado who has followed Soviet and 412
Russian gymnastics for the past 40 years. 413

Data sources are triangulated as a test of reliability and to flesh out the different 414
perspectives expressed. Much of the data, including the interviews, have appeared 415
in a prior format on *RRG*. Participant observation of fan behaviour online and at 416
competitions also enabled assumptions to be drawn about the nature of the markets. 417

418 **6 A Research Agenda for Russian Gymnastics and Its** 419 **Potential for Sports Tourism**

420 Delineating the nature of what can be investigated at the present time is challeng-
421 ing. There are multiple contexts within which the research can be set—(1) destina-
422 tion tourism to the Russian Federation (2) event tourism to gymnastics competitions
423 (3) online fan behaviour as a form of digital tourism (4) gymnastics as cultural
424 heritage (5) the heritage dimensions of gymnastics as a possible determinant in
425 destination image formation. This paper can only provide an overview of possible
426 research directions, which are given below.

427 **6.1 Profiling the Motivations of Gymnastics Tourists**

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

439 **6.2 Profiling Online Russian Gymnastics Fans and Their** 440 **Behaviour**

441 Today's online fans could be tomorrow's tourists. At least they represent a poten-
442 tially significant target market of gymnastics tourism. An appreciation of these
443 'digital tourists', along with their motivations and behaviour patterns represent a
444 great opportunity to tap into this market of potential gymnastic tourists. Also,
445 important is to provide the digital tourists with opportunities to experience gym-
446 nastics in the virtual world and tap into potential opportunities. Researching the
447 profile of the online fans, their background, motivations, intention to visit real
448 gymnastics events represents an important area of research. A netnographic
449 approach might contribute to the development of an understanding of how fans in
450 Russia and elsewhere behave, with a view to considering how and if their behaviour
451 leads to the development of a destination image and associated travel intentions.

6.3 *Understanding the Nature of Gymnastics as a Cultural Form* 452
453

Sports have become a global phenomenon and most of them have their own 454
common language and culture which is shared and understood by followers of 455
different sports. However, sports also remain distinctly local and have their unique 456
identity and fandom, who share it and sometime create new forms of culture and 457
politics. It would be fascinating to research and understand the identity, culture and 458
politics surrounding artistic gymnastics. A major question in this context is, to what 459
extent have changes in the sport influenced its shape as a cultural form and hence its 460
propensity to promote destination image for Russia? 461

6.4 *The Commodification of Artistic Gymnastics* 462

Sports, like various forms of culture, are commercialised to make them more 463
accessible, ensure their commercial viability and to find resources for their devel- 464
opment. Developing sport as a tourism product invariably involves its commodifi- 465
cation. Identifying the barriers to commodification of gymnastics in the Russian 466
Federation for either commercial or tourism purposes from social, economic, 467
cultural and political perspectives is an important area to research, with the aim 468
of considering key product development opportunities for gymnastics tourism to 469
the Russian Federation including but not limited to tours, memberships, and online 470
affiliations. 471

In view of the ever changing identity of gymnastics, the issue of the authentic 472
representation of the Russian national character may have an influence on how the 473
sport can be marketed as a tourism product. Important too is to examine the impacts 474
of commodification of gymnastics on its aficionados. 475

6.5 *Artistic Gymnastics as an Agent in the Formation of Russian National Identity and Destination Image* 476
477

Understanding the processes by which national identity is formed and how artistic 478
gymnastics, along with other cultural forms, can contribute to this formation will be 479
a precursor to considering issues of positioning and branding and in developing 480
models of sport heritage branding. 481

Artistic gymnastics with its artistry and sophistication could be a powerful 482
means for forming an attractive image to both existing and emerging tourist 483
destinations in Russia. The potential of artistic gymnastics to form or modify the 484
image of tourist destination in Russia and the type of images that are likely to be 485
attributed to artistic gymnastics represent an research opportunity that is valuable to 486

487 the literature on sports and tourism marketing. Allied to this theme is the exami-
488 nation of the current image of tourist destinations in Russia and issues of image gap
489 and the chain of influence in tourism destination image of Russia (Kokkranikal,
490 Cronje, & Butler, 2011).

491 **6.6 *Issues and Challenges in Sports Tourism Development*** 492 ***in Russia***

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

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

512 **6.7 *Conceptual Issues Surrounding Sports Tourism***

- 513 • Definitional issues. The current definitional frameworks need some consider-
514 ation in light of the emergence of the 'digital' sports fan and the relationship
515 online behaviour might have to patterns of visitation.
- 516 • Relationship marketing. Where there is a dedicated niche following of a sport it
517 might be worth exploring a relationship marketing approach to the transforma-
518 tion of online behaviour to physical visitation. The potential of sports member-
519 ships may be worth investigation.

7 Conclusions

520

Sports tourism in the Russian Federation is currently focussed on the staging of 521
 mega events and its associated benefits. This paper considers sports heritage 522
 tourism and a variant, online form of sports tourism as a means of encouraging 523
 the formation of destination image and providing the pre-requisites for the devel- 524
 opment of a variety of Russian gymnastics tourism product. At present, tourism is in 525
 a development stage in Russia and there is also little understanding of the appeal of 526
 gymnastics and its potential as a sports tourism product. The rich cultural associ- 527
 ations of Russian gymnastics make it a rich field for the collection of data that may 528
 contribute to understandings of sport as a cultural form, its potential for tourism 529
 commodification, branding and product development. 530

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