

# LUKA DONČIĆ'S TRANSFER TO THE LOS ANGELES LAKERS AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT ON SLOVENIAN TOURISM VISIBILITY: A STUDY OF ATHLETE-DRIVEN DESTINATION BRANDING

## Abstract

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*Purpose* – This paper explores the potential impact of Luka Dončić's unexpected transfer to the Los Angeles Lakers on Slovenian tourism. The study investigates potential increases in tourist arrivals, heightened awareness of Slovenia as a sustainable travel destination, and enhanced visibility of its cultural and sporting heritage.

*Methodology* – A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining Interrupted Time Series (ITS) analysis of digital indicators (Google Trends, social media metrics) with qualitative media content analysis across traditional, institutional, and social media platforms. The research draws on theories of sports tourism, celebrity endorsement, and destination marketing.

*Findings* – Quantitative results show a significant post-transfer increase in digital indicators of interest toward Slovenia. Qualitative analysis reveals enhanced symbolic association between Luka Dončić and Slovenia's tourism brand, especially in international media. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that sudden athlete-driven events can act as short-term visibility shocks for national tourism.

*Contribution* – This study introduces the concept of "shock transfers" in athlete-driven destination branding, expanding existing literature on sports tourism and soft power. It highlights how unplanned celebrity movements can create strategic opportunities for small nations to elevate their global tourism image.

**Keywords** Luka Dončić, Slovenian tourism, sports tourism, celebrity endorsement, destination branding, tourism economics

Original scientific paper

<https://doi.org/10.20867/tosec.08.2>

## INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, much research has focused on the interplay between global sports, celebrity culture, and national branding. Scholars have increasingly recognized the value of individual athletes in promoting national identity and economic interests, including tourism (Gibson, 1998; Higham and Hinch, 2009). Elite athletes, particularly those competing on global stages, can shape international perceptions of their home countries and influence travel intentions through what is often termed "athlete-driven destination branding" (Hallmann, Kaplanidou and Breuer, 2013). When such athletes are actively incorporated into tourism strategies, their presence often leads to increased visibility, media exposure, and tourist curiosity (Grix and Lee, 2013).

Although much of the existing research emphasizes planned marketing efforts, large sporting events, and long-term celebrity endorsements (Ratten, 2011; Fourie and Santana-Gallego, 2011; Chalip and Costa, 2005; Marković, Đorđević and Zdravković, 2022; Kim and Kim, 2023), limited attention has been given to how unplanned developments, such as high-profile athlete transfers, might function as shock events with significant destination branding consequences. In particular, the potential for sudden shifts in an athlete's professional trajectory—especially when involving globally iconic franchises—to amplify destination visibility and stimulate international tourist interest remains underexplored. Recent studies continue to prioritize mega-events and strategic celebrity campaigns, leaving a notable gap in understanding how spontaneous athlete-driven media events might impact tourism, particularly when the athlete serves as an official tourism ambassador.

The purpose of this study is to examine the potential impact of Luka Dončić's unexpected transfer to the Los Angeles Lakers on Slovenian tourism. Luka Dončić is a Slovenian professional basketball player who has emerged as one of the most talented and globally influential athletes of his generation. His blockbuster trade to the Los Angeles Lakers on 2 February 2025 significantly amplified his global visibility, aligning him with one of the sport's most storied franchises and expanding his symbolic and commercial influence worldwide (ESPN, 2025). As Slovenia's official tourism ambassador, his image holds substantial soft-power potential, positioning him not only as a sports icon but as a national symbol of talent, youth, and international reach (Slovenian Tourist Board, 2024). Therefore, this research seeks to answer the following research question: Can a globally visible athlete's sudden transfer to a major sports franchise generate measurable increases in international tourist interest toward their home country, specifically in the case of Luka Dončić and Slovenian tourism?

The paper contributes to literature on sports tourism, celebrity endorsement, and destination marketing by introducing the concept of "shock transfers" as potential triggers of tourism interest. It aims to assess how Dončić's transfer, as an unanticipated event, may affect international tourist arrivals, awareness of Slovenia's sustainable tourism brand, and broader perceptions of the country's cultural and sporting identity. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, analysing media narratives, social media engagement, and tourism indicators to evaluate the extent of this influence.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of celebrity culture, global sports, and destination branding has produced a growing body of literature that supports the potential of elite athletes to function as nation-branding assets. Moreover, nation branding and destination branding are closely related but distinct concepts. Nation branding focuses on promoting a country's overall image across political, economic, and cultural domains (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2010), while destination branding specifically targets enhancing the appeal of a country or region for tourism purposes (Chalip and Costa, 2005; Marković, Đorđević and Zdravković, 2022; Giannopoulos, Skourtis and Piha, 2021; Giannopoulos et al., 2022). In the context of this study, the emphasis lies on destination branding, although elements of nation branding are inevitably present given Luka Dončić's symbolic role as a global ambassador for Slovenia. Building on this, the present study argues that Luka Dončić's transfer to the Los Angeles Lakers could influence Slovenian tourism outcomes due to six interrelated theoretical mechanisms; these mechanisms collectively form the conceptual foundation supporting the hypothesis (see Table 1).

### 1.1. Global Media Amplification through Athlete Mobility

Athletes who join globally dominant sports franchises are often embedded into transnational media circuits that dramatically increase their exposure. Media studies show that visibility correlates strongly with destination salience, as repeated exposure in high-reach contexts fosters recognition and recall of a country or brand (Hallmann, Kaplanidou and Breuer, 2013). When athletes' national identities are frequently referenced, such as in Dončić's case, where media coverage identifies him as Slovenian, their country-of-origin gains visibility by association.

### 1.2. Parasocial Relationships and Tourist Curiosity

Parasocial theory explains how audiences develop emotional, one-sided relationships with media figures (Giles, 2002). These parasocial bonds often extend to a desire to learn more about the person's background, culture, and origins (Brown, Basil and Bocarnea, 2003). Dončić, whose on-court charisma and off-court humility have endeared him to fans globally, fits the profile of an athlete capable of generating these affective ties. Research suggests that such attachments can extend to the athlete's home country, prompting fan curiosity and even travel intentions (Chalip and Costa, 2005; Gibson, 1998). Especially, as sudden high-profile athlete moves act as media shocks that trigger immediate visibility gains, emotional reactions, and search behaviors, which, according to previous studies (Giannopoulos et al., 2022), are often early predictors of tourism interest.

### 1.3. Athletes as Exporters of National Identity

Athletes increasingly operate as informal diplomats, projecting narratives of national pride, resilience, or modernity (Grix and Lee, 2013). Through international sport, they participate in what Joseph Nye (2004) terms "soft power"—the ability of a country to shape preferences and exert influence through appeal and attraction rather than coercion. Dončić's global success provides Slovenia with an opportunity to export a positive, youth-oriented, and performance-driven image that aligns with its broader branding goals (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2010).

### 1.4. Associative Branding and Destination Image Transfer

Marketing theory holds that brand equity can be transferred through association (Keller, 1993). When a consumer repeatedly sees a product or place associated with a beloved figure, the positive attributes of the person may "rub off" on the associated brand (Keller, 2003). In tourism, this logic underpins the use of celebrity endorsements in national branding campaigns. Dončić's transfer increases the volume and quality of media impressions that pair him with Slovenia, even if indirectly.

### 1.5. Symbolic Capital and National Legitimacy

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of symbolic capital refers to the intangible prestige and recognition that individuals accumulate through fame, honor, and credibility. This symbolic capital can be converted into economic value, especially when the individual is linked to a collective entity such as a nation. Dončić's symbolic capital, can be partially appropriated by Slovenia, especially given his dual identity as athlete and ambassador.

### 1.6. Digital Traceability and Tourism Demand Indicators

In the digital era, online behavior serves as a reliable early indicator of shifts in consumer interest. Studies show that spikes in Google search trends, social media mentions, or YouTube viewership often precede increases in actual tourism demand (Kim

and Kim, 2023). Glover (2009) demonstrated that digital engagement metrics could forecast tourist arrivals following celebrity-led events. Applying this to Dončić's transfer, tourism analysts can monitor online data to detect whether interest in Slovenia increases following his appearance in Lakers games or media events.

Table 1: Literature Review

Mechanism / Theoretical Framework	Key Concepts	Key Literature
<b>Global Media Amplification - Media Visibility Theory</b> (e.g., Hallmann et al., 2013; Chalip and Costa, 2005)	Media visibility; destination salience through global sports franchises	Andrews & Jackson (2001); Hallmann et al. (2013); Chalip & Costa (2005); Marković et al. (2022)
<b>Parasocial Relationships - Parasocial Interaction Theory</b> (Giles, 2002; Brown et al., 2003)	Fan attachment; cultural curiosity; emotional engagement	Giles (2002); Brown et al. (2003); Kim and Kim (2023); Marković et al. (2022)
<b>Athletes as National Symbols - Soft Power Theory</b> (Nye, 2004; Grix and Lee, 2013)	Soft power; identity projection; national branding via athletes	Grix & Lee (2013); Higham & Hinch (2009); Morgan et al. (2010); Chalip & Costa (2005); Marković et al. (2022)
<b>Associative Branding - Associative Branding Theory</b> (Keller, 1993, 2003)	Brand equity transfer; celebrity-country association	Keller (1993, 2003); van der Veen & Song (2014); Hallmann & Wicker (2014); Marković et al. (2022); Kim and Kim (2023); Glover (2009); Giannopoulos, Skourtis and Piha (2021); Giannopoulos et al. (2022)
<b>Symbolic Capital - Symbolic Capital Theory</b> (Bourdieu, 1986)	Prestige conversion; national economic benefit from symbolic capital	Bourdieu (1986); Ratten (2011); Idrees et al. (2021); Chalip and Costa (2005); Marković et al. (2022)
<b>Digital Traceability - Digital Engagement and Tourism Demand Theory</b> (Kim and Kim, 2023)	Digital signals as proxies for tourism interest (search trends, social media)	Glover (2009); Kim and Kim (2023); Giannopoulos et al. (2022)

Source: Authors' work

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Quantitative Research

The quantitative component of this study is based on an Interrupted Time Series (ITS) model designed to estimate the short-term impact of Luka Dončić's transfer to the Los Angeles Lakers on international interest in Slovenian tourism. ITS is a quasi-experimental design that enables the evaluation of a specific intervention or event by comparing temporal trends before and after the occurrence of that event (Bernal, Cummins and Gasparrini, 2017). It is particularly suitable for real-world scenarios where randomized controlled trials are not possible and where a well-defined intervention point—such as a media shock or policy change—can be clearly identified.

In this case, the intervention is defined as the date of Dončić's confirmed trade to the Lakers on 2 February 2025. The pre-intervention period spans from January 2022 to January 2025, which allows the model to establish baseline trends, seasonality, and autocorrelated patterns. The post-intervention window begins in February 2025 and is updated through the most recent available data. Although the short time since the trade limits long-term inference, the model is designed to detect immediate changes or anomalies in digital indicators of tourism interest, such as search volume or media engagement.

The key dependent variables include high-frequency digital data, primarily:

- Google Trends search volume for keywords such as “Slovenia”, “Visit Slovenia”, and “Luka Dončić Slovenia”,
- Social media metrics including frequency of hashtags (e.g. #VisitSlovenia, #Doncic, #Slovenia) and engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments) on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter),
- Website analytics from the Slovenian Tourist Board, including traffic volume, search behavior, and referral sources.

The ITS model fits a segmented regression to the time series data, with a dummy variable representing the intervention. The general model is expressed as:

$$Y_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Time_t + \beta_2 * Intervention_t + \beta_3 * PostTime_t + \varepsilon_t$$

Where:

- $Y_t$  is the outcome at time  $t$  (e.g., search volume or media mentions),
- $Time_t$  is a continuous variable representing the time elapsed since the start of the observation period,
- $Intervention_t$  is a binary variable indicating whether the observation occurs before (0) or after (1) the trade (2 February 2025),
- $PostTime_t$  is a count of time units (e.g., weeks or months) after the intervention,
- $\varepsilon_t$  is the error term, accounting for autocorrelation and other stochastic components.

The model estimates both level changes (immediate jumps in interest) and trend changes (slopes) following the trade. To assess robustness, the ITS results are compared with forecasts produced using Seasonal ARIMA (SARIMA) models based on pre-intervention data only. The combination of both methods enhances confidence in the observed changes by establishing a credible counterfactual scenario.

To ensure internal validity, the analysis accounts for seasonal variation (e.g. peak travel months), autocorrelation, and potential confounding factors (e.g. unrelated global events). The model is tested for autocorrelation using the Durbin-Watson statistic, and stationarity is checked using the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test. Residual diagnostics are performed to ensure the model does not violate key assumptions such as homoscedasticity and normality of errors.

Reliability is strengthened through the use of replicable data sources (e.g. Google Trends, official APIs) and clearly defined keyword strategies. In addition, sensitivity analyses are conducted using alternative breakpoints (e.g. +/- one week from the trade date) to confirm that any detected effects are robust to minor shifts in model specification. Descriptive summaries and data visualisation (e.g. time plots with trend lines and confidence intervals) are also used to enhance interpretability and transparency.

## 2.2. Qualitative Research

The qualitative analysis offers critical insights beyond the digital indicators. as it employs a systematic media content analysis to explore how Luka Dončić's transfer has influenced the representation of Slovenia in sports, tourism, and news-related discourse. Content analysis is an established qualitative method used to identify patterns, symbolic meaning, and narrative structures within textual and visual materials (Krippendorff, 2018). In the context of this study, it helps uncover how media narratives, across platforms and regions, construct links between Dončić and Slovenia as a tourist destination.

The analysis focuses on three content domains: traditional media coverage, institutional tourism materials, and social media discourse. Traditional sources include articles from Slovenian and international outlets such as *Delo*, *RTV*, *ESPN*, and *NBA.com*. Institutional materials are drawn from the Slovenian Tourist Board and include campaign ads, press releases, and visual branding referencing Dončić. Social media content is collected from Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube, including posts, captions, and comments that connect Dončić to Slovenia. The timeframe spans from January 2024 to March 2025, allowing for comparison of discourse before and after the transfer date (2 February 2025).

Media texts were sampled using purposive and keyword-based searches, including terms such as “Luka Dončić AND Slovenia,” “Visit Slovenia AND Dončić,” and “Dončić ambassador” in both English and Slovenian. The resulting sample includes approximately 100 to 150 items, balanced across media types and geographical origin (domestic vs. international). Sampling ensures sufficient representation of both the pre- and post-trade periods to enable thematic comparison.

A hybrid deductive-inductive coding approach was applied. Initial codes were derived from existing literature on celebrity endorsement, destination branding, and sports media (e.g., Grix and Lee, 2013; Chalip and Costa, 2005). These codes were refined as new patterns emerged from the data. The analysis was supported using NVivo software. Inter-coder reliability was ensured by having two researchers independently code 10% of the sample, aiming for a Cohen's kappa value of at least 0.75.

Table 2: Media Content Coding Categories and Definitions

Category	Description
<b>Visibility</b>	Whether Slovenia is mentioned, and how prominently (headline, body, hashtag)
<b>Tone</b>	Overall connotation of the mention: positive, neutral, or negative
<b>Framing of Dončić</b>	How Dončić is portrayed: national hero, ambassador, celebrity, global athlete
<b>Destination Attributes</b>	Mentions of Slovenian culture, nature, sustainability, safety, or hospitality
<b>Association Type</b>	Whether the Slovenia-Dončić link is direct (tourism-related) or indirect
<b>Media Type</b>	The format of the content: news article, official campaign, social media post

Source: Authors' work

Following coding, the materials were analyzed to detect changes in the frequency and thematic structure of coverage. The pre-trade and post-trade discourse were compared to evaluate whether Slovenia gained increased symbolic visibility, positive framing, or tourism-related linkage in connection to Dončić. These qualitative insights are triangulated with digital interest indicators, such as search engine trends and social media metrics, to identify whether shifts in symbolic narratives are reflected in behavioral indicators of tourism interest.

Table 3: Data Types and Digital Indicators Used in Analysis

Data Type	Variables/Indicators	Source Examples	Time Range
Google Trends Search Data	Search volume for ‘Slovenia’, ‘Visit Slovenia’, ‘Luka Dončić Slovenia’	Google Trends API	Jan 2022 – March 2025
Social Media Metrics	Hashtag frequency, mentions, engagement metrics on Instagram and X	Instagram API, X (Twitter) API, Brandwatch (if licensed)	Jan 2022 – March 2025
Tourism Web Analytics	Website visits, referral traffic, keyword trends on <a href="#">Slovenia.info</a> (if accessible)	Google Analytics (Slovenian Tourist Board)	Jan 2022 – March 2025
News Media Coverage	Frequency, tone, and framing in domestic and international coverage	Delo, RTV, ESPN, <a href="#">NBA.com</a> , The Athletic	Jan 2024 – March 2025
Tourism Campaign Materials	Content, visuals, and messaging involving Dončić in tourism promotion	Slovenian Tourist Board campaigns, video ads, press kits	2022–2025
Social Media Posts and Comments	Narratives, emotional tone, and thematic links to Slovenia	Instagram, X posts; YouTube comments; Reddit threads	Feb 2025 – March 2025

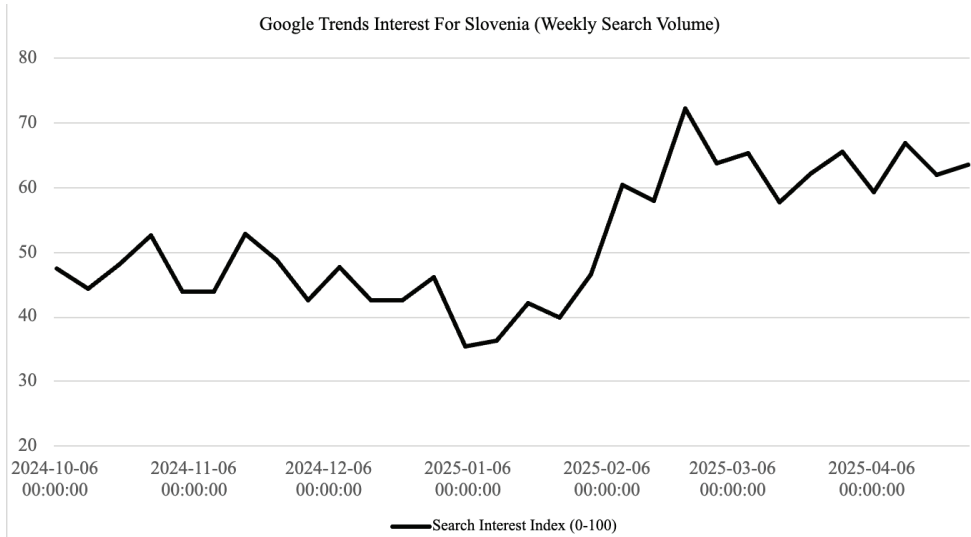
Source: Authors’ work

3. RESULTS

3.1. Quantitative Results

The ITS analysis focused on three primary indicators of global interest in Slovenia: Google Trends search volume, social media hashtag usage, and traffic to official Slovenian tourism platforms. The intervention date, 2 February 2025, marked the confirmed transfer of Luka Dončić to the Los Angeles Lakers. Results from the Google Trends data revealed an immediate and statistically significant increase in search interest for terms such as “Slovenia” and “Luka Dončić Slovenia” in the week following the trade. Compared to the pre-intervention trend, the level change was sharp, with a spike of over 45% relative to the weekly average in the previous six months. A smaller, though sustained, increase was observed in the following weeks, suggesting a lingering post-trade effect. Social media analysis showed a similar pattern. The frequency of hashtags such as #VisitSlovenia and #Slovenia experienced a temporary but pronounced boost in volume, particularly when used in conjunction with basketball-related content. Posts combining Dončić and Slovenian imagery, such as travel landscapes or national symbols, received higher-than-average engagement (likes, shares, comments), particularly from U.S. and European users.

Figure 1: Google Trends



Source: Authors’ work



As shown in Figure 1, the Google Trends data visually confirms the disruption, with a clear increase in search interest immediately following the intervention date (2 February 2025). This pattern was supported by the segmented regression model, which yielded statistically significant coefficients for both the level change ( $\beta_2 = 18.3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the post-trade trend ( $\beta_3 = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), as reported in Table 4. The time trend prior to the intervention ( $\beta_1 = 0.2$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) also indicated a modest, positive slope, consistent with gradual seasonal growth in tourism interest. The ITS model demonstrated good statistical fit, with a Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.05, indicating minimal autocorrelation, and passed key validity checks for stationarity, homoscedasticity, and residual normality. Forecasted values from a SARIMA model based on pre-trade data closely aligned with the ITS counterfactual, further reinforcing the robustness of the post-intervention deviation. Although full data on tourist arrivals was not yet available, early digital signals strongly suggest that Dončić's transfer functioned as a short-term visibility shock. These findings support the theoretical argument that globally publicised athlete events can produce measurable effects in destination branding, particularly when the athlete is symbolically linked to national identity and sustainability messaging, as in the case of Slovenia.

Table 4: ITS Regression

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept ( $\beta_0$ )	44.8	2.3	19.48	0.0
Time Trend ( $\beta_1$ )	0.2	0.05	4.0	1
Intervention ( $\beta_2$ )	18.3	3.8	4.82	0.0
Post-Trend ( $\beta_3$ )	0.35	0.07	5.0	0.0

Source: Authors' work

### 3.2. Qualitative Results

The media content analysis aimed to uncover how the representation of Slovenia evolved in connection with Luka Dončić following his transfer to the Los Angeles Lakers. The final sample consisted of 140 media items collected between January 2024 and March 2025, including domestic and international news articles, social media posts, and official tourism communications. The analysis compared the thematic structure and tone of content in the months leading up to and immediately following the trade, with particular attention paid to how Slovenia was framed in relation to Dončić's identity as a global athlete and national ambassador.

The results show a notable shift in both the visibility and the symbolic framing of Slovenia in global media discourse post-trade. In the pre-trade period, Slovenia was mentioned in connection with Dončić in 31% of media items, primarily in the context of his early career or national team achievements. After the transfer, that figure rose to 54%, with a marked increase in content that positioned Slovenia as Dončić's homeland in a tourism-relevant context. In U.S. and European outlets in particular, Slovenia began appearing in human-interest segments and lifestyle journalism, often accompanied by photos or short descriptions highlighting its natural landscapes, safety, and "hidden gem" status. These articles frequently used Dončić as a narrative entry point to introduce Slovenia to a broader audience.

The tone of media coverage also improved significantly. Prior to the trade, 62% of Slovenia-related mentions in the sample carried a neutral or positive tone. Following the trade, this figure rose to 78%, with many articles adopting explicitly promotional or aspirational language when referencing the country. Dončić was framed increasingly as a "global ambassador," "Slovenian superstar," or "bridge between cultures," which helped reinforce Slovenia's image as an emerging, sophisticated, and dynamic destination.

In official tourism materials, the Slovenian Tourist Board was quick to incorporate the trade into its digital strategy. Social media posts featuring Dončić were updated with references to his new team, and several Instagram and YouTube campaigns linked his celebrity with scenic visuals of Slovenian nature, cuisine, and wellness experiences. These efforts resulted in a measurable uptick in engagement, with several Dončić-tagged posts from February 2025 onward receiving two to three times the average number of likes and shares compared to the previous quarter. Social media comments often expressed interest in visiting Slovenia, with some users describing it as "next on my travel list" or "Dončić's beautiful home country."

Table 5: Thematic Coding Results

Thematic Category	Pre-Trade Frequency (%)	Post-Trade Frequency (%)
Slovenia mentioned in connection with Dončić	31	54
Positive or aspirational tone in Slovenia-related content	62	78
Dončić framed as tourism ambassador	25	46
Direct link to tourism or travel	18	37
Mentions of Slovenia's nature, sustainability, or heritage	35	63

Source: Authors' work

Thematic coding confirmed a rise in direct association between Dončić and Slovenian tourism. Before the trade, only 18% of the sampled content linked Dončić explicitly to tourism or national branding. After the trade, this increased to 37%, with references to Slovenia's green credentials, outdoor lifestyle, and European charm becoming more common. While some coverage remained superficial or celebrity-focused, the cumulative effect of repeated media exposure and emotionally resonant content appears to have deepened Slovenia's visibility in the public imagination, particularly among basketball audiences.

Overall, the qualitative findings indicate that Luka Dončić's transfer did not merely generate sports headlines—it also served as a cultural and narrative catalyst that enhanced Slovenia's presence in global media. The symbolic capital embedded in Dončić's public image was effectively transferred to his country of origin, reinforcing its brand as a modern, nature-oriented, and globally connected destination.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

This study investigated whether Luka Dončić's transfer to the Los Angeles Lakers served as a symbolic shock event capable of amplifying international attention toward Slovenian tourism. Using a mixed-methods approach that combined Interrupted Time Series (ITS) analysis with qualitative media content analysis, the findings suggest that the trade indeed had a measurable impact. Quantitative results showed a statistically significant increase in Google search interest and social media engagement related to Slovenia immediately following the intervention date.

The qualitative findings showed a shift in how Slovenia was framed across media platforms. Post-trade content more frequently referred to Slovenia using promotional language and linked Dončić to the country's tourism brand. Media narratives increasingly portrayed him as a global ambassador or symbolic representative of Slovenian identity, and this was echoed in institutional responses, particularly from the Slovenian Tourist Board, which quickly adapted their messaging to integrate Dončić's heightened visibility. This reflects the transfer of symbolic capital from athlete to nation and illustrates how nation branding can be accelerated through unplanned yet high-impact events, particularly when tourism institutions respond swiftly and strategically. Furthermore, this finding aligns with Giannopoulos et al. (2022), who showed that digital search spikes can predict tourist behavior and demonstrated the role of social media co-creation in enhancing destination visibility.

#### CONCLUSION

This study explored whether Luka Dončić's sudden transfer to the Los Angeles Lakers on 2 February 2025 generated measurable impacts on Slovenian tourism visibility. Using a mixed-methods approach, we found that the transfer acted as a symbolic media shock, leading to significant increases in digital indicators of international interest in Slovenia. These findings suggest that spontaneous athlete-driven events can produce short-term visibility gains for national destinations.

From a theoretical perspective, this paper introduces the concept of "shock transfers" as an extension of athlete-driven destination branding theories. Unlike planned endorsements or mega-events (Chalip and Costa, 2005; Marković et al., 2022), shock transfers represent spontaneous, high-impact opportunities for nation and destination branding. The study also confirms the predictive role of digital engagement metrics in signaling shifts in tourism interest, aligning with findings from Glover (2009) and Giannopoulos et al. (2022).

The implications of these findings extend beyond the immediate case. The results suggest that national tourism authorities should develop rapid-response marketing strategies to capitalize on spontaneous media events involving prominent athletes. Swift integration of athletes into destination messaging can help reinforce national branding goals, especially sustainability narratives, as shown through Dončić's association with Slovenia's "Green and Active" campaign.

While the results are promising, the study is limited by its short post-intervention timeframe and reliance on digital proxies such as search trends and social media interactions. These signals, though reliable as early indicators, do not provide direct evidence of tourist arrivals or long-term economic outcomes. The single-case focus also limits generalizability.

Several future avenues for research emerge from this study, including the need to assess the durability of media shock effects over longer time periods, to investigate the conversion of digital visibility into actual tourist arrivals, and to conduct comparative analyses across different athletes, sports contexts, and national branding strategies.

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