

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL INNOVATION IN THE TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY SECTOR: A CASE STUDY OF POGRADEC AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

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Abstract

The rapid development of technology and its practical implementation over the past decade have significantly increased the number of internet users worldwide. These changes have been strongly reflected in various sectors of the economy, particularly in the tourism industry.

Today, the opportunities to explore the natural beauty of different parts of the world are no longer limited but have become accessible to visitors from all countries. As a result, the development of tourism is closely linked to digital innovations—though not exclusively dependent on them.

Thus, in the postmodern era in which we live, technological advancements have also transformed the ways in which people plan, explore, and interact with tourist destinations such as Pogradec and its surrounding areas.

This paper aims to identify and analyze the impact of digital innovation implementation in today's tourism and hospitality sector within the Pogradec region. The study seeks to provide a clear overview of how various businesses operating in this area currently function and how they can enhance their profitability through promotional strategies or other methods enabled by technological advancement.

This study is limited to the Pogradec region. However, it may serve as a valuable starting point for conducting broader and more comprehensive research in the future.

Keywords: *Digital innovation, digital platforms, tourism, tourist destination, promotion*

ROLI I INOVACIONIT DIGJITAL NË SEKTORIN E TURIZMIT DHE MIKPRITJES: RAST STUDIMI POGRADECI SI DESTINACION TURISTIK

Abstrakt

Zhvillimet e vrullshme të teknologjisë dhe zbatimi i tyre në praktikë, në dhjetëvjeçarin e fundit, kanë rritur ndjeshëm numrin e përdoruesve të internetit, në mbarë botën. Këto ndryshime janë reflektuar dukshëm edhe në sektorin e ekonomisë, veçanërisht në industrinë e turizmit. Sot, mundësitë për të eksploruar bukuritë natyrore të vendeve të ndryshme të botës nuk janë më të kufizuara, por të aksesueshme nga vizitorë të të gjitha vendeve. Si rrjedhojë, zhvillimi i turizmit është ngushtësisht i lidhur me inovacionet digjitale.

Kështu, në kohët postmoderne në të cilat po jetojmë, zhvillimi i teknologjisë ka sjellë ndryshime edhe në mnyrën sesi njerzit realizojnë, eksplorojnë dhe ndërveprojnë me destinacionet turistike të tilla si Pogradeci dhe rrethinat e tij.

Ky punim ka si qëllim të identifikojë dhe analizojë ndikimin që ka zbatimi i inovacioneve digjitale në ditët e sotme në sektorin e turizmit dhe mikpritjes në Rrethin e Pogradecit. Në këtë mënyrë, synohet të ofrohet një panoramë e qartë mbi mënyrat se si bizneset e ndryshme që operojnë në këtë rajon funksionojnë aktualisht dhe se si ato mund të rrisin fitimet përmes promovimeve ose metodave të tjera që ofron zhvillimi teknologjik.

Ky studim është i kufizuar vetëm për Rrethin e Pogradecit. Megjithatë, ai mund të shërbejë si një nismë e vlefshme për realizimin e studimeve të tjera më gjithëpërfshirëse në të ardhmen.

Fjalët kyçe: Inovacion digjital, platforma digjitale, turizëm, destinacion turistik, promovion.

I. INTRODUCTION

The city of Pogradec, located in the southeastern part of Albania along the shores of Lake Ohrid, has recently attracted increasing interest from thousands of domestic and international visitors. Since July 5, 2019, the lake-shared between Albania and North Macedonia—has been included in UNESCO’s World Heritage List as a site of mixed natural and cultural significance (Braho, 2024).

Since the early 2000s, the city has undergone steady development, influenced not only by improvements in road infrastructure but also,

more importantly, by the use of digital platforms to promote its natural attractions, together with those of the lake and surrounding areas.

This context gives rise to two key research questions: Which digital platforms are most widely recognized and utilized by businesses in this region? And to what extent have these platforms contributed to the increase of their revenues?

II. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is based, first, on a review of existing literature in both foreign and Albanian languages, and second, on the analysis of responses provided by 20 business entities operating in the Pogradec District. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, with a particular focus on the analysis of a questionnaire consisting of 10 test items. The questionnaires were administered during the period from June 2024 to July 2025.

The sample was selected randomly and included only small and medium-sized enterprises. The administration of the questionnaires was conducted in full compliance with standard research protocols, ensuring the anonymity of respondents. Participants were also informed of their right to omit any question they considered inappropriate and of their right to withdraw from the questionnaire at any point they deemed necessary.

The primary objective was to identify the main digital platforms used by small and medium-sized enterprises in the Pogradec District. In addition, the collected data enabled an examination of the ways in which these platforms have contributed to revenue growth and business expansion. The first part of the questionnaire gathered general information about the businesses, such as type of activity and duration of operation. The second part focused on identifying the main digital platforms utilized by these businesses and exploring how such platforms have facilitated network expansion and increased revenues.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability in the tourism sector has attracted the attention of numerous scholars worldwide. This is largely due to its multidimensional nature, which makes it a subject of interest across multiple disciplines, including tourism (Niñerola et al., 2019). Some researchers argue that the very concept of sustainability in tourism requires further theoretical examination. The term “sustainability” derives from the Latin “sustinere” (meaning “to hold up”) and is generally defined in relation to the maintenance of a certain level of optimal developmental progress (Onions, 1964, as cited in Slocum, 2015).

Today, the relationship between sustainability and tourism is of particular importance given the significant role of tourism in the global economy (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2017). At the same time, the tourism industry and the broader aim of sustainability cannot be fully understood without considering the impact of digitalization. On one hand, digitalization has expanded the opportunities of the industry on a global scale; on the other hand, it has increased the responsibilities of individuals with respect to their skills and environmental awareness. Digital platforms, in particular, have considerably enhanced travel planning by facilitating trip organization and enabling the personalization of itineraries (Akhtar et al., 2021).

On the other hand, environmental and social challenges emerge, which, according to scholars in the field, must be taken into account when implementing innovation in tourism. Moreover, Zeqiri et al. (2025) argue that the process of digitalization, now widely embedded in the tourism industry, has intensified concerns regarding environmental issues and ecosystem degradation. For this reason, sustainable practices are required that prioritize environmental protection, cultural heritage preservation, and local empowerment. They emphasize that it is precisely these challenges that can shape a new image of tourism—one in which technological development and sustainability converge to define the future of the sector.

In this regard, digital innovation constitutes a key factor in the growth and sustainable development of global and regional tourism. It

provides tourists worldwide with greater access to information, enhanced flexibility, and richer experiences, while enabling businesses to become more competitive and sustainable in the market. The impact of using innovative digital tools in the tourism sector is multifaceted and operates in two main directions. First, it influences the performance of businesses and their visibility in local, national, and global markets. Second, it affects tourists, particularly in the processes of planning, organizing, and making travel-related choices. In this context, the generation and use of various tools associated with tourism have a significant impact on society. Travel recommendation systems, for instance, have become highly popular applications for organizing and planning tourist trips (Berka & Plößnig, 2004; Moreno, Valls, Isern, Marin, & Borràs, 2013; Vansteenwegen, Souffriau, Berghe, & Oudheusden, 2011).

According to scholars, travel planning holds particular importance in the tourism sector and in digital innovation. As noted by Cenamor, Tomás de la Rosa, Núñez, and Borrajo (2017), the relevance and contribution of such applications can be summarized in several key aspects:

- The ability to automatically select the initial state from a social network.
- The provision of more realistic plans through well-reasoned decision-making processes. For example, restaurants recommended on digital platforms are seamlessly integrated into tourist itineraries precisely when it is expected that the user will be hungry, based on their stated preferences.
- The presentation of ready-made models based on time, budget, and other constraints.

Overall, the range of digital platforms in tourism is extensive; however, the following section highlights the most prominent platforms that have seen the widest use in the last decade.

1. Platforms for Booking and Service Sales (wikipedia)

These platforms assist tourists in booking accommodations, flights, activities, and more. Key examples include:

- Booking.com– primarily for hotel and accommodation reservations.
- Airbnb– for unique accommodations and local experiences.
- Expedia, Trip.com, Agoda – integrated platforms for flights, hotels, and car rentals.
- Skyscanner, Kayak – for comparing prices of flights, hotels, and car rentals.

2. Platforms for Destination Management and Promotion. These tools help tourism entities and agencies manage information and promote a destination:

- Google Travel / Google My Business – essential for online visibility.
- TripAdvisor – used for promotion through user reviews and ratings.
- Official tourism websites (e.g., Visit Albania, Visit Tirana) – used by many countries and cities.
- Tourism Management Systems (TMS) – internal systems for tourism agencies.

3. Social Media as Marketing Platforms. Many tourism operators use social media for marketing and engaging with tourists:

- Facebook– for business pages, promotion, and communication.
- Instagram – for visual marketing through photos and videos of destinations.
- TikTok – for creative and viral tourism content.
- YouTube– for promotional videos, travel guides, and tourist experiences.
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4. Applications and Platforms for Digital Guides. These assist tourists during their travels:

- Google Maps / Apple Maps– navigation and location suggestions.
 - Detour / VoiceMap– audio guides for cities and destinations.
 - GetYourGuide / Viator – for booking local activities and tours.
- Culture Trip – cultural recommendations and unique experiences.

5. Accommodation Management Platforms, (for businesses).

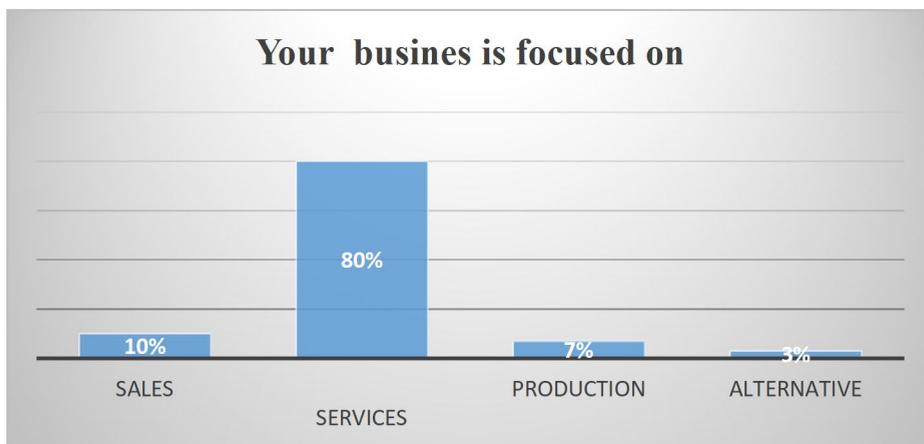
These are used by hotels, inns, and rental apartments:

- Cloudbeds, Hostelworld PMS, Little Hotelier– for reservation and client management.
- Channel Manager Tools – automatic connection to platforms such as Booking.com and Airbnb.

IV. FINDINGS AND RESULTS OF THE STUDY

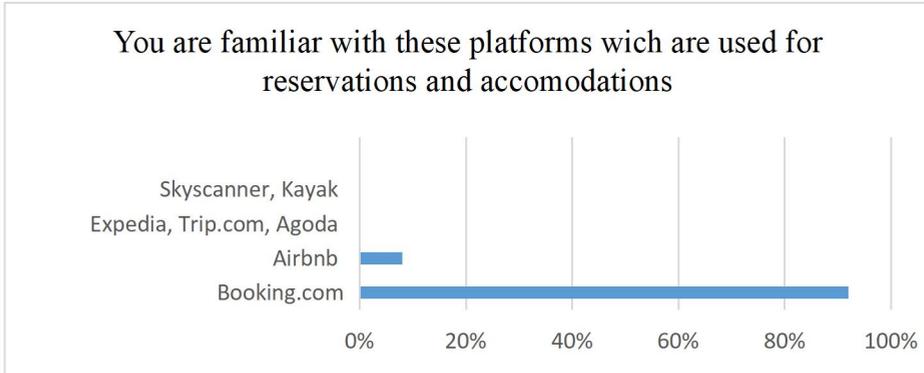
In order to secure the necessary data for this study, a questionnaire consisting of 10 test items was developed. A total of 20 small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the Pogradec District were surveyed, primarily in the sectors of production, sales, and services.

Figure nr. 1. Business focus



Does your business belong to the manufacturing, services, sales, or a combination of these sectors? Among the 20 businesses included in the study, 80% operated in the services sector, 10% in sales, and 10% in manufacturing. Additionally, 25% of respondents reported having more than 10 years of experience in the tourism sector, 34% had less than 10 years of experience, 15% had over 20 years of experience, and 26% had between 1 and 5 years of experience.

Figure nr. 2. Platforms which are used for reservations and accomodations



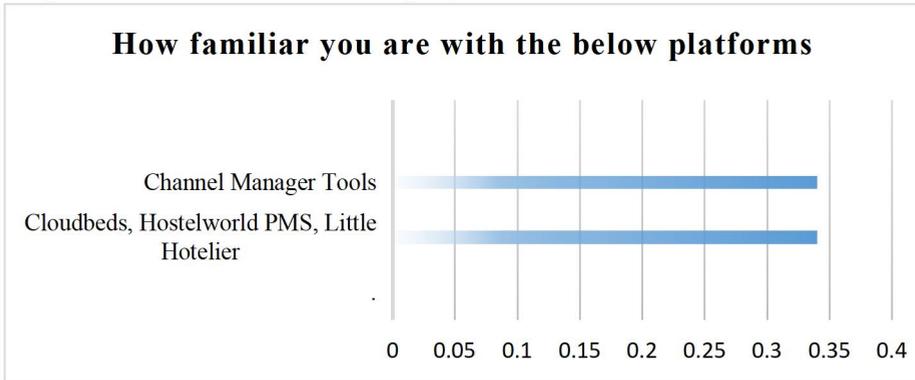
Among the most well-known and widely used platforms for reservations and accommodations by the businesses included in the study are Booking.com and Airbnb, accounting for 92% and 8% respectively. Other platforms are neither known nor used.

Figure nr. 3 Platforms which are used in the field of management and promotion



The study also examined respondents' engagement with platforms widely used in the field of management and promotion. As illustrated in the graphical presentation, respondents demonstrated greater familiarity with and usage of platforms such as Google Travel and Google My Business (77%), followed by TripAdvisor (12%) and Visit (11%)

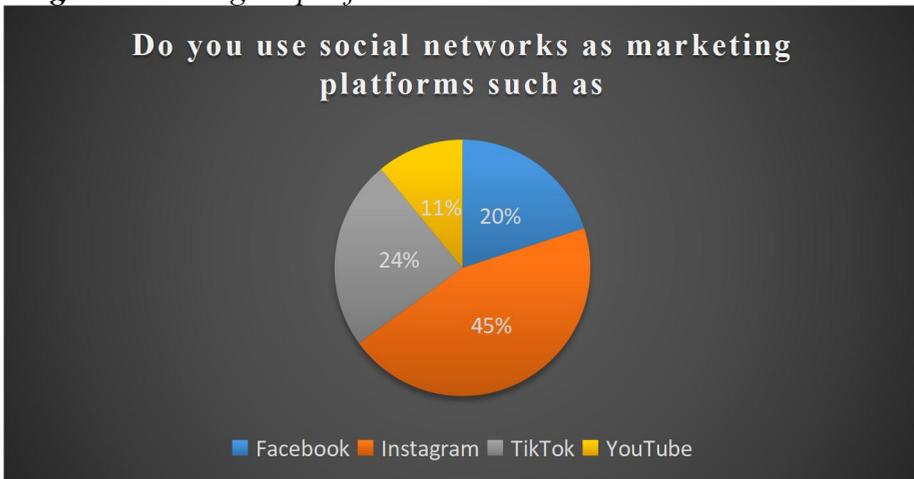
Figure nr. 4. Familiar about the platforms.



The above figure presents a novelty and is of particular interest for discussion, as the responses of the participants are noteworthy. When asked about new accommodation management platforms that are widely used globally, the majority of respondents not only recognized them but also reported using them to increase their bookings and revenue.

Platforms such as Cloudbeds, Hostelworld PMS, Little Hotelier, and Channel Manager Tools are primarily used by hotels, guesthouses, and rental apartments. Among the 20 businesses included in the study, 68% indicated that they use both of the aforementioned platforms in nearly equal measure.

Figure nr. 5. Digital platforms.

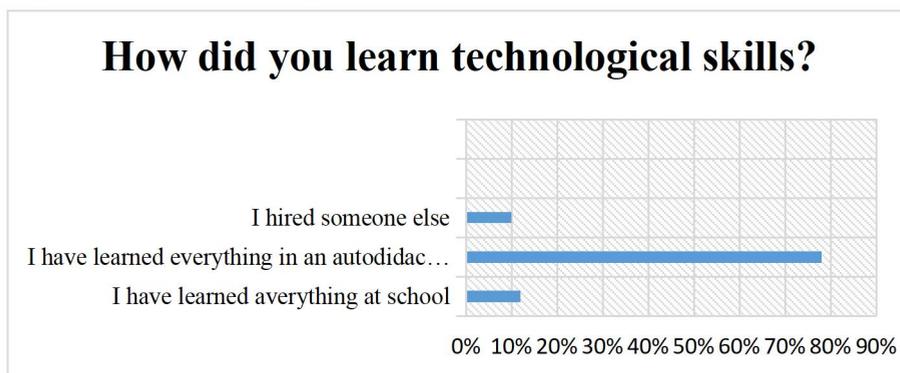


The recent development of digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has seen widespread adoption not only in the entertainment sector but also increasingly in the tourism industry. According to the findings, 20% of respondents reported using these social networks to promote the products or services they offer.

The majority of respondents—specifically 45%—indicated that they use Instagram for promotional purposes. A significant increase is also observed in the use of TikTok, with 24% of respondents stating that they use this platform to advertise their business. Meanwhile, only 11% reported using YouTube for business promotion.

Regarding the question of whether the respondents' businesses can be found through applications and digital guide platforms such as Google Maps / Apple Maps, Detour / VoiceMap, GetYourGuide / Viator, and Culture Trip, 99% of respondents answered affirmatively.

Figure nr. 6. Technological skills.



The study also examined how business owners in the Pogradec District have managed to become part of these digital platforms—whether through formal education or independently. Among the 20 businesses surveyed, only 12% of business owners held a higher education degree and reported having learned how to navigate the internet and integrate their businesses into various social platforms through their academic background. Approximately 88% of respondents stated that they had acquired knowledge about how social networks function in a self-taught

manner or by employing individuals who could be considered professionals of the future in this field.

In response to an open-ended question posed to the participants, their current challenges can be summarized into three main issues, which are:

1. An urgent need for improved waste management in the city and surrounding areas.
2. Implementation of new measures and continuation of existing ones aimed at preserving the lake's ecosystem.
3. Creation of opportunities and incentives to expand accommodation capacities during peak tourist season-particularly in the summer months, but not limited to them.

Conclusions

- The use of innovative digital platforms contributes significantly to sustainable development in the tourism sector.
- Despite limitations related to infrastructure challenges, legal obstacles, lack of training in tourism, cybersecurity concerns, and other issues, a considerable number of digital platforms are being implemented by small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the Pogradec District.
- The primary purpose of using these platforms is marketing, promotion, and generating recommendations.
- The main impacts of digital innovation in tourism appear to be in areas such as personalizing the tourist experience, enhancing marketing and effective communication, managing tourist destinations, and promoting sustainable development.
- Technological advancements also help reduce environmental impact through smart logistics and the promotion of sustainable tourism.

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