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# THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN TOURISM

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## ABSTRACT

Nowadays people are more willing to spend money on travel than ever before they are looking forward to opening borders after the global pandemic. New possibilities make traveling easier and travelers can choose options quicker for immediate travel. Travelers do not have to check special hotels in a chosen destination and compare prices to find the most suitable or cheapest option. Websites, as well as mobile applications in tourism, can do that for them, making traveling much simpler, easier and more comfortable. Tourism is fast-growing industry becoming more popular day by day and the main aim of the research was to study the role of digital technologies in tourism, especially during COVID-19.

**Key words:** digital platforms, digital technologies, mobile applications, tourism applications, covid-19.

## INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms are disrupting the way the tourism sector is run from end to end - impacting the way destinations facilitate tourism, develop a product, access markets, gather data, and attract visitors. This digital disruption has ripple effects

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across the tourism industry, making it challenging for low-income markets to leverage tourism for development impacts. These new technologies will force companies to find new ways to expand the markets in which they compete, to attract and retain customers by tailoring products and services to their needs. As technologies face rapid development and the number of mobile users increases each year, tourism promotion should no longer be performed exclusively in traditional fashion with printed or web flyers and brochures. Promoting through a communication network has made e-marketing possible from anywhere at any time, using the Internet, wi-fi networks or local area networks. Especially, mobile devices allow people to buy on the move using portable devices, such as cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs) or laptops [1]. Technology-delivered e-marketing is where the consumers are never in physical proximity to the provider and may be delivered via a mix of asynchronous and synchronous technologies. With the increased number of cell phone users in Europe and in the whole world, it is compelling that we build a relation between the consumer and tourism service provider through the most used communication means: cell phone. We propose an involvement of the mobile communication companies in the marketing process, especially in the target market identification and demand-supply correlation process by using a mobile service.

**The idea of Digital Platforms.** When creating value, there is a meeting of these crucial parties: The owner of the platform are usually companies from the private sector. The owner of the platform is responsible for managing and developing the platform. The examples are Apple and Google that offer their platforms as the App Store and the Google Play mobile app manufacturers to sell their services that support the platform. Users and consumers – individuals, communities, or business entities that use the value provided by the platform. The end user will download the mobile app using the respective app store, which uses its platform to provide developer services. The manufacturer and producers – create offers that they sell using a chosen platform. For example, app creators



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sell their products using Google Play or App Store. Provider – the role is to provide a platform interface. For example, mobile phone manufacturers. Another part of the platform constitutes other interested parties. The first large group involves partners in the development, the capital formation of a company that can significantly influence the emergence of the platform ecosystem. Other stakeholders also include a part of the public sector that understands the benefit of developing the platform for public welfare, as well as the various regulators of states that recognize any unlawfulness within the business. Regarding digital platforms, the question of modularity arises where it is possible in digital content applications as well as in their distribution. By making the digital platforms easy to obtain, they can be part of multiple mobile devices, networks, and part of operating system platforms [2]. A digital platform creates value when producers interact with consumers. The platform provides open, participatory infrastructure for these interactions and sets out the conditions for their management. The main purpose of a platform is to allow trade between users and to facilitate the exchange of goods, services, or social value, allowing for value creation for all participants. The platforms create value in the community, and thus, people use it. Platforms can circumvent business rules, soften firm business boundaries, and transform the business of internal processes [Digital Platforms and the Future of Tourism: A world Tourism Day Celebration.]. In case of Georgia, public organizations are also ordering mobile applications to change the life for better, for tourists as well as for local people too.

### **Enabling technologies shaping the tourism ecosystem**

**Mobile technology/cloud computing.** Cloud technologies, Wi-Fi and international mobile plans make mobile devices increasingly pervasive and important travel aids, including for accessing destination information in real time, online booking, mobile payment. Cloud technologies allow SMEs to manage their business from anywhere highspeed internet is available. Data analytics. In the digital era, consumers and businesses alike are in the

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perpetual generation of new data. The capacity of businesses to use data drives new business models and productivity. Data analytics can predict customer preferences and channel consumer purchasing behavior [3]. It is also used for revenue management and to employ dynamic pricing. Employees of SMEs must develop skills to be part of this data driven ecosystem and issues of privacy, data sharing are key concerns of government.

**Artificial Intelligence (AI).** Artificial intelligence, chatbots, and voice technology enable customers to undertake internet searches, digital check-in, access digital concierge services, voice assistants and smart rooms. This technology offers a personalized, customized, on-demand service that facilitates seamless travel.

**Internet of Things (IoT).** IoT can fuel a data rich tourism sector and support smart tourism by making cities more efficient. The interoperability of sensors, data, and automation produces real time insights and information for marketing and managing tourism, for improving visitor experiences, increasing operational and resource efficiencies while also reducing environmental impacts [4].

**Augmented reality/Virtual Reality (AR/VR).** Augmented reality systems show virtual objects in the real world. Uses in tourism can include replacing paper-based marketing and advertising materials, gamification and augmented visitor experiences in the destination, and travel assistants that guide users through complex public transport systems in real time.

**Blockchain.** Smart contracts, based on blockchain, can be used across the supply chain. Future gains would see user-friendly apps tailored for wide diffusion to tourism businesses of all sizes to enhance end-to-end user transparency [Preparing tourism businesses for the digital future].

Since ecommerce has taken off on the internet, tourism products have become one of the most traded items on the net. Tourism products and services have been made available on the internet at bargain prices through intermediaries. Tourism providers (hotels, airlines, etc.) have started to sell their services through the



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Internet. This has put pressure on intermediaries from both the virtual and the traditional brick and mortar stores. According to a study, 39% of leisure American travelers (whether they use the Internet or not) think that the Internet is easier and faster to use for travel planning than a travel agent.

### Digital platforms challenges and Georgia

Wehost is the first Airbnb management company in Georgia to help those who want to rent an apartment to the owners of the properties. Following in the footsteps of the development of modern technologies in the world, geo-information systems of tourism are actively integrated in web and mobile technologies in Georgia too, for example the application biliki offers customers a ready-made electronic product, which details the type of road / trail, distance, a textual description of the location, photographs and more. Each object is a detailed text Presented with description and photo material. In addition, Biliki is affiliated with and integrated with booking.com, which allows customers to find and book exactly the hotel that is located on the route of their choice. The app also integrates a car booking system, which is a good opportunity to save effort. Also, the application is enriched with various tips on travel equipment, rules in protected areas, transportation and other important issues. For this purpose was created innovative startups - Expago, digital platform, which is visiting Georgia travelers with local residents with the opportunity to, in different cities, and the angle of everyday life will become and culinary, agritourism, extreme and their interest in other areas of the local people as the sun attention is a unique experience. Through Expago, local and international tourists in Georgia share the type of tourist experience and information that they cannot get from books / the Internet or even traditional tours [5]. Tourists can book the next rounds in the application at this stage; Astro, night economy, shopping, theater, Soviet cars, Old Tbilisi, culinary, agritourism and more. The app is very easy to use. It can be downloaded for free on both Android and IOS mobile phones. The application can also be used on the website

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– desktop version (Expago). Within the huge and diversified mobile apps market, travel-related apps rank as the 7th most downloaded type of apps. An amazing 60% of the total 1.75 billion smartphone users worldwide have downloaded travel-related apps and 45% of the same group is going to use mobile apps to plan future holidays (how can tourism enterprises benefit from mobile apps?) Many tourism and hotel companies are not just putting their web or offline functions in mobile format, but they are also creating experiences and new business models designed specifically for the mobile channel. The following list of factors gives an idea of the full potential of digitalization: Searching for information before the trip: perhaps the most widespread use, since today more than 90% of users check information on the Internet before reserving a trip or hotel. This translates into a responsive website and even into versions directly envisioned for mobile devices, apps, and useful, quality content creation for the user, such as the NH Hoteles group blog [6]. Checking recommendations: although this is part of the process of searching for information before the trip, in many cases, it is done via other channels, not on the company's website, therefore following up with and responding to reviews, especially negative ones, regardless of whether they are justified requires separate handling. Online check-in and check-out: among the most pragmatic functions, especially for reserving hotels and flights, the possibility to check in online saves time and paperwork for the omer and improves the company's internal management. In some cases, such as when reserving flights with some airlines, you must check-in online in order to avoid an additional cost to do so at the check-in counter; this does not fit well with loyalty strategies, but in most cases, it is an added value. Secure reservation and purchase process: increases in online reservations and purchases have also brought with it increased user concern for the security of their personal and financial data. One of the main challenges for any company is to implement disruptive solutions that offer high security in data handling while not causing a poor user experience, since this leads to high percentages of abandonment in the



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reservation and purchase process. App development: users also search for information during the trip, which has fostered the development of both general and specialized apps. In the case of hotels, they can serve to provide information about places and activities both in and outside of the hotel, with mobile services customized according to user preferences. There are also apps developed by tourism organizations such as Paradores of Spain or virtual tourist offices, and by city governments themselves to promote local tourism. Smart cities: some towns, taking a step further in developing apps, have begun to implement geolocating smart systems with beacons that provide useful information for tourism: weather, hotels, culture, transportation, and even additional services such as supervision systems for children. Connectivity: free mobile connectivity is essential now for many users, both Wi-Fi and 4G, for example. Internet connections are not only offered now in most hotels and other establishments such as restaurants and airports, but there are also areas implementing free Wi-Fi throughout the whole city [7]. Access to devices: some chains offer their clients devices such as tablets or smartphones during their hotel stay as a courtesy or for a small rental fee, offering access to tourist information and entertainment and practical information. For example, the Casual Hoteles chain offers the Mobile Pack service, which includes a device with Wi-Fi connection, portable battery, and selfie stick, free to customers who reserve directly on their website. New business models: the high availability of users and the ability to geolocate them allow for additional, much more customized services, even new services such as reservations at the destination [8]. This trend is even higher both among young people who travel without a set plan and reserve a hotel when they are already at their destination, and in business trips, which are often subject to last-minute changes. Sector-based focus: apps focused on specific sectors are yielding excellent results in the entertainment and tourism sector, since they meet very concrete needs, such as the third sector, family tourism with children, the elderly, singles, the LGBT community, and even interest-based



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travel such as ornithology, hiking, scuba diving, or literary tours. Augmented and virtual reality: beyond mobile devices, augmented and virtual reality experiences are now being offered, such as a digital observatory of the Barcelona Skyline at Terraza 83,3, which provides information about the monuments thanks to augmented reality technology, and which also allows immersive visits to some of the monuments with virtual reality goggles (Digital transformation in the tourism and travel sector: the challenge of mobile devices). The Ministers and representatives of national tourism administrations of the Members of the Executive Council of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), gathered on the occasion of the 112th Session of the Executive Council of the UNWTO, in Tbilisi, Georgia, on 15–17 September 2020, have agreed on support the following aspects: Placing tourism, as a service trade, among the priorities for socio-economic recovery plans for its capacity to create jobs and transform societies with a strong multiplier effect on other sectors throughout its broad value chains, - Building a stimulating environment for entrepreneurship and technological transformation, with a special focus on MSMEs as well as on self-employed and informal workers, in order to sustain existing jobs and support the creation of new employment opportunities, - Investing in the development of new skills, including digital skills training, for current and future tourism professionals, - Maximizing the use of technology in the tourism operations and improving digital literacy, - Facilitating investment for tourism enterprises and public infrastructure aimed at diversifying markets and products, reducing seasonality and dependency on a narrow set of external factors, especially within the green-transition framework, - Fostering the development of sustainable and responsible rural tourism as a means of job creation, social inclusion and regional development, with a particular focus on domestic tourism and nearby source markets, - Accelerating the transition towards a circular economy in the tourism value chain, - Measuring beyond economic impacts and generating regular and timely data to support decision-making towards sustainability in tourism, and

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developing and harmonizing data, indicators and intelligence systems, including big data and artificial intelligence (AI), to better measure and manage tourism. As it is mentioned the use of digital technologies appears to be the main challenge for developing countries in order the restart tourism in a short time period (Actions for a sustainable recovery of tourism). During the global pandemic Covid19, Georgia's Innovation and Technology Agency (GITA) and Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA) jointly with Google had organized online workshop “Digital Tourism Ecosystem”, which was held on April 14, 2020 and it was for public officials, NGOs and tourism enthusiasts under the Google for Tourism Georgia campaign. The workshop was a perfect opportunity to learn more about Google digital tools and boost one's digital skills in editing of Google Maps, adding places, working with visualization and analysis of situations related to tourism. The workshop was conducted by a team of Google Certified Photographers and Trainers, who provide advice, assistance and support to each participant and practical application of their digital competencies in creating comfortable learning environments and new success stories (Online workshop Digital tourism ecosystem) on May 8, 2020 there was organized Google Digital Tools for Tourism workshop where also was discussed how to use digital platforms and on June 30, 2020 was held one more workshop about “Mastering digital skills to grow tourism business” it was organized again by Georgia's Innovation and Technology Agency (GITA), Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA) jointly with Google [9].

The training was provided by Georgian-speaking trainers who have shared their digital expertise and answered questions live. After the workshop the attendants have got informaton about:

- How to attend Google annual global events;
- How to add the favorite cafeteria on Google Maps, if it’s missing;
- Learn how to advertise enterprise using Google My Business and increase customer traffic by doing that;

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- Get to know how to create a fully functional promo website within 30 minutes and completely free of charge [10];

Such kind of workshops and seminars give a hand to beginners, who are starting business on their own and still do not know how to use platforms and digital tools and promote their business. Georgia's innovations and technology agency is giving grants and supports startup companies to develop digital platforms and innovative applications not only for tourism, but other industries too, so this kind of partnership will have positive effects of course on digital Georgia development for the future.

### CONCLUSION:

To sum up it can be said that general advantages of the digital system are enormous market, similar products do not exist, minimum investments for the partners and good correlation between demand and supply. In addition, for the customer the benefits are multiples: - more information without moving; - minimum costs and maximum information; - targeted and huge offer; - easy access to information on tourism services; - better information on tourism services; - convenience for customers. The system helps tourist organizations in improving economic activities, incorrect and easy identification of the target segment, in differentiating their offer from the competitors and in supply positioning on the market. Other advantages for tourist organizations could be: promotion materials easy delivered; decrease of promotional expenses; - personnel expenses economy; time economy. It is a strong belief that a Mobile services platform will improve economical results both to the tourist services provider and mobile services provider (i.e. mobile phone company), but increases consumer satisfaction too. Georgian travelers as the research has shown are using international applications more often than the Georgia ones, because they are often traveling abroad and this is necessary for them, but

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Georgian applications have also great opportunities for people who want the spend holidays in Georgia.

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