

The role of online platforms in shaping tourism and labour dynamics in northern Albania

Abstract

The digital transformation of tourism is reshaping labour markets and regional economies. Northern Albania, rich in natural and cultural resources but limited by infrastructure and workforce challenges, has adopted online platforms such as Booking.com, TripAdvisor and Airbnb, opening up new opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship and income diversification while also creating pressures linked to seasonality, informality and unequal digital skills. Based on secondary data, literature and sectoral reports, this article examines the role of digital tourism in driving labour market changes and economic development. Results suggest that digitalisation lowers entry barriers for small businesses, enhances competitiveness and supports micro-entrepreneurship, particularly among young people and women. Yet, persistent skills gaps, weak infrastructure and a reliance on unstable demand risk reinforcing insecurity and exclusion. The study concludes that, while digital tourism offers strong potential for inclusive and sustainable growth, its benefits depend on targeted policies in digital training, the formalisation of work and regional development.

Keywords: digital tourism, economic development, northern Albania, ICT adoption, sustainable tourism

Introduction

The global tourism sector is undergoing a structural transformation under the impact of digitalisation. Online platforms, electronic booking systems and social media are transforming the way tourists search, plan and experience destinations. This process, widely conceptualised as e-tourism, reflects the integration of information and communications technologies (ICT) throughout the tourism value chain (Buhalis and Law 2008). Albania, although a developing destination, is no exception to these global trends. The Albanian government's 'Digital Agenda Albania 2022–2026' demonstrates a strategic commitment to advancing society towards the digital age, including the tourism sector. Nowadays, tourism constitutes one of the principal pillars of the economy (Watkins et al. 2018); therefore, its modernisation through digitalisation is of critical significance.

Northern Albania is a region distinguished by unique natural and cultural assets, yet it simultaneously confronts significant infrastructural and geographical constraints. The mountainous terrain and distance from urban centres have historically limited the promotion and accessibility of these areas to tourists. However, recent technological developments offer new opportunities to overcome these limitations.

Through digital platforms, information about destinations in the north of the country becomes accessible ‘in one click’ from every corner of the world. Tourists can now discover the natural beauty of Theth or Valbona through websites, blogs, social networks and mobile apps, without being limited by the physical lack of promotional infrastructure on the ground. This enhances the global visibility of destinations in northern Albania and diversifies their visitor base by attracting adventure-seeking tourists.

Nevertheless, the full-scale utilisation of ICT in Albanian tourism remains challenging. Previous studies have highlighted that the provision of digital services for tourists in Albania remains at an early stage. Adoption of technology across the sector is limited and digital marketing remains underdeveloped. This creates a gap between urban and rural destinations in the north in terms of online presence and access to global markets. Previous literature (e.g. Gjika and Pano 2020) has integrated interviews with specialists to deepen understanding of the drivers and barriers to digitalisation. In the absence of robust primary data on businesses in northern Albania, this article draws carefully on existing secondary sources and analyses from other authors to assess the current situation and ongoing trends.

The article enriches these existing studies by providing a broader theoretical and regional context and a more comprehensive review of the literature alongside extended analyses and discussion on the impact of digital platforms on the hotel industry. In conclusion, detailed findings and recommendations are provided for policymakers and local stakeholders, aiming to facilitate the adoption of ICT and enhance the competitiveness of tourism in northern Albania in the digital era.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and exploratory approach, relying primarily on secondary data due to the scarcity of primary datasets on northern Albania. The analysis draws on academic literature, institutional statistics (e.g. INSTAT, Ministry of Tourism and the Environment), and reports from international organisations (UNDP, EU) to capture trends in digital tourism and their economic and labour market effects. Empirical findings from earlier studies in Albania, as well as data from online platforms such as Booking.com, TripAdvisor and Airbnb, are integrated to provide specific illustrations of how digitalisation is shaping business practices and competitiveness.

Thematic content analysis was applied to organise the data in five dimensions:

- global and national digitalisation trends
- adoption of online platforms in Albania
- economic impacts
- labour market implications
- sustainability challenges.

This method allows for the identification of connections between digital transformation, tourism development and labour market restructuring, while situating northern Albania within broader international debates.

The main limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary data, which reduces the depth of its insights into local businesses. To address this, the article combines information from multiple sources to strengthen reliability. Future research should complement this approach with primary methods such as surveys, interviews and sentiment analysis of online reviews to provide more granular evidence.

ICT in Albanian tourism

The impact of ICT on tourism is becoming increasingly evident in Albania, where the tourism sector has experienced significant growth, particularly after 2010, positioning itself as a regional competitor. The use of digital channels is considered essential in sustaining this momentum (Noti and Trebicka 2016). Entrepreneurs and managers in the Albanian tourism sector have begun to diversify their services through the internet, expanding online channels for marketing and booking tourism services. The growing use of social media and travel platforms has contributed to improving the international image of Albanian tourism, making information about destinations more accessible and transparent. However, the degree of full ICT adoption by Albanian tourism businesses has been relatively slow compared to global trends, due to a range of structural and cultural constraints.

The role of online platforms in tourism

One of the most transformative aspects of digital tourism is the rise of online platforms that connect travellers with information, services and other travellers. Platforms – including, among many others, TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Airbnb and Expedia – have profoundly reshaped both tourist decision-making and destination marketing. This section examines the impact of these online platforms on tourists' decision-making processes and how destinations and tourism businesses are managing their marketing and services, with illustrative references to northern Albania.

The increased use of online platforms has transformed the way tourism services are evaluated. Empirical studies indicate that tourists increasingly trust the reviews and ratings left by other visitors rather than official tourism recommendations. Braimllari (2017), analysing the online reviews of 132 hotels in Tirana and Durrës, found that the average rating of these accommodations was 8.65/10, with factors such as hotel category, number of online reviews and year of registration on the platform exerting a positive influence on overall customer ratings. This finding highlights the significance of online reputation, indicating that hotels with more reviews and higher ratings tend to attract a larger number of potential clients. The widespread presence of leading Albanian tourism businesses on platforms demonstrates that operators are adapting to this new distribution model. However, certain characteristics, such as business size or location outside major centres, may still influence ratings in different ways (Braimllari 2017).

Impact on tourist decision-making

Online platforms have empowered travellers to adopt a 'do-it-yourself' approach to trip planning. Before the digital era, a tourist interested in northern Albania might

have relied on a travel agent or a guidebook which could only offer limited information. Today, that same tourist can read dozens of reviews of guesthouses in Theth on TripAdvisor, compare hotel prices in Shkodër on Booking.com, browse photos on Instagram and even watch hiking vlogs from the Valbona Valley on YouTube, all of which strongly inform their decisions about where to go, where to stay and what to do. Research consistently shows that user-generated content and peer reviews have a significant influence on travel decisions. Sparks and Browning (2011), for example, found that positive online reviews increase consumers' intentions to book a specific hotel, whereas negative reviews discourage them, even overriding brand reputation or price considerations. In Albania, online reviews have become a critical factor in shaping reputation. Spaho and Sala (2017) emphasise the importance of online ratings, showing that factors such as the number of reviews can enhance a hotel's credibility and attractiveness to potential clients. Many tourists equate a high volume of reviews with greater reliability; for instance, a hotel with 200 reviews averaging 8.5/10 on Booking.com may be preferred over one with only 10 reviews averaging 9/10, as the larger sample size builds greater trust in the rating.

Smart tourism and emerging trends

The concept of 'smart tourism' has also entered the Albanian academic discourse. Gjika and Pano (2020) observed that tourism operators in Albania, particularly those linked to international markets, have begun to adopt elements of smart tourism. Their findings suggest that the use of ICT by Albanian tourism operators is at a higher level compared to the average among businesses in the national economy, reflecting that the very nature of tourism activity requires continuous innovation. Certain characteristics of smart tourism are already evident, including personalised communication with clients via social networks, the use of databases for economic decision-making and the application of digital marketing tools (Gjika and Pano 2020). Nevertheless, the authors emphasise that the sector still lags in implementing the more advanced technologies of 'Tourism 4.0', such as cloud computing, Big Data, the internet of things (IoT) and virtual reality. Although awareness of their potential benefits exists, the lack of investment and capacity continues to constrain full digital transformation.

A 2022 study notes that, following shocks such as the 2019 earthquake¹ and the Covid-19 pandemic, Albanian tourism businesses placed increased importance on technology as a tool for recovery and promotion, adopting new digital solutions in their offerings (Muça et al. 2022). In addition, major domestic companies have launched technological platforms to support the development of e-tourism in the country, indicating that market actors are innovating to adapt to global trends. Official statistics confirm that the trend of digitalisation among Albanian tourism businesses is on the rise. According to INSTAT (2024), 24.5 % of enterprises sold products or services in 2024 through websites, dedicated applications, e-commerce platforms and applications used by other businesses for product trade, a figure which

1 An earthquake of magnitude 6.4 struck north-western Albania on 26 November 2019, causing 51 deaths.

represents a 9.7 % increase on 2023. Moreover, 92.9 % of tourism operators in Albania reported using social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram, as their primary marketing tools for attracting new clients (Gjika and Pano 2020). This indicates that online communication channels have become indispensable for tourism businesses targeting the modern market.

Furthermore, some 78.6 % of operators reported using e-banking in their financial activities and nearly 43 % offered card payment options as a service. This demonstrates that digitalisation extends beyond marketing to affect operational and economic aspects in addition (Gjika and Pano 2020). Overall, the existing literature suggests that the adoption of ICT by Albanian tourism businesses, although progressing at varying rates depending on size and location, is yielding tangible benefits in terms of efficiency, market access and competitiveness.

The impact of digital platforms on the hotel sector

Northern Albania, renowned for its mountainous landscapes, national parks and rich cultural heritage, was once a ‘hidden secret’ of tourism, frequented mainly by adventurous travellers informed through traditional channels such as guidebooks and personal recommendations. Today, this perspective has undergone significant changes due to the expansion of digital platforms. Family-run hotels and guesthouses in areas such as Theth and Valbona have benefited from the opportunity to appear on the global tourism map through the internet. Online booking platforms have enabled them to reach tourists from around the world without the need for intermediaries. For example, on Booking.com, one can find dozens of guesthouses in these localities, with hundreds of reviews from international visitors sharing their experiences. These positive reviews often function as a form of ‘viral advertising’ for the destination, generating interest among new travellers seeking authentic nature-based experiences.

One effect of digital platforms is an increase in the number of tourists visiting northern destinations. According to official data, the number of visitors to the Theth and Valbona national parks has nearly tripled over only a short timescale. This tourism boom is closely linked to the rise in online and media exposure of these areas following the pandemic, with travellers increasingly looking for open-air destinations in which to enjoy nature.

Online visibility and marketing

For local businesses, visibility translates into increased demand and opportunities to expand their activity. Small hotels and family-run guesthouses report a significant rise in direct online bookings compared to a decade ago, when clients had to contact them by telephone or upon physically arriving at the destination. Today, through updated platform profiles, guesthouse owners can manage room availability, price seasonally and communicate with clients before their arrival. Some guesthouses in Theth have created dedicated Facebook and Instagram pages where they post photos of the property and surrounding landscape, share information about activities and respond to inquiries from potential tourists. This active form of digital marketing has proven effective in building a local brand and establishing trust with visitors. As a result, the tourism season in northern Albania has been extended, with online-informed

tourists visiting the region not only in the summer months but also in spring and autumn (when weather conditions permit), thereby lengthening the active tourism period and improving local economic sustainability.

Improving quality and competitiveness

Another positive impact of digital platforms concerns the enhancement of competition and the stimulation of service quality. Since every tourist can now leave a public review, accommodation owners in the north of the country are paying closer attention to service standards to obtain the best possible feedback. This has led to improvements in infrastructure – for example better physical conditions of rooms – as well as in the attitudes shown toward clients. A guesthouse with high ratings on online platforms is more likely to be chosen by future visitors, making online reputation a primary asset. For instance, a guesthouse in Valbona that receives a rating above nine due to cleanliness and the high quality of its service will hold an advantage over a rival guesthouse with lower scores, leading the latter to reflect and raise its service standards to remain competitive in the market. In this way, online platforms function not only as marketplaces but also as self-regulating mechanisms which increase the overall quality of the tourism offer in the region. More broadly, technology has significantly lowered entry barriers for northern Albanian destinations, integrating them more equally into the national tourism economy.

Economic impact

Digital transformation in tourism has a significant economic impact, manifesting through both direct and indirect channels. Filipiak et al. (2023) find a strong correlation between digitalisation and growth in the tourism industry across EU countries, suggesting that embracing digital tools can enhance tourism's economic performance.

Direct financial contributions stem from increased tourist arrivals, higher revenues generated through digital marketing channels and an expanded capacity for online booking and payment systems, the latter simplifying transactions and attracting international visitors (Gjika and Pano 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that digital tourism has enhanced Albania's attractiveness to foreign investment, thereby stimulating economic activity through improved GDP growth and incremental value added in local economies (Broz et. al. 2020).

Direct effects also include the improvement of operational efficiency in tourism businesses, leading to increased productivity and profitability. Enhanced ICT penetration, in terms of mobile network coverage, broadband subscriptions and household internet access, enables a more harmonised digital environment that contributes to integration into the broader digital economy and enhances service quality (Broz et al. 2020). For instance, digital tools deployed in tourism operations, such as self-service kiosks, real-time customer feedback systems and data-driven marketing strategies, have improved decision-making and product customisation, thereby broadening market appeal and driving higher revenue per visitor (Kordha et al. 2019).

The indirect effects of the digital transformation on economic growth are multifaceted. First, digital tourism catalyses the development of ancillary sectors such as ICT, digital marketing and the creative industries, indirectly stimulating local economies by promoting cluster formations and business networking (Dionizi and Kercina 2025). Second, digital-enabled agritourism and rural tourism are contributing to income diversification in rural areas, reducing emigration by creating stable employment opportunities and raising the overall standard of living (Kortoci 2017). Third, the spillover effects of successful digital tourism strategies have fostered regional economic cooperation by facilitating cross-border marketing and promoting integrated tourism experiences that span multiple countries in the western Balkans (Broz et al. 2020).

Labour market impact

The transition to digital tourism has significant implications for the labour market in northern Albania. On the one hand, digital transformation is creating new job categories related to ICT, digital marketing, data analytics and online customer service, thereby replacing traditional roles that are increasingly automated or outsourced (Pazari et al. 2025). For tourism businesses, this means that the workforce must adapt to meet the evolving demands of a more technologically advanced industry. New positions in remote work management, digital content creation and cybersecurity are emerging which are not only enhancing employment opportunities within the sector but also contributing to the development of a more diversified labour market (Gjoni and Elezi 2023).

In northern Albania, the labour market is witnessing an upskilling trend driven by the need to adopt advanced digital competencies. The rapid integration of digital solutions in tourism has necessitated continual training and reskilling programmes, positioning institutions to invest in digital literacy and technical education in collaboration with the private sector (Satka et al. 2023). This drive towards enhanced digital capabilities is particularly beneficial for younger workers and women, who are more likely to benefit from flexible, digitally enabled job opportunities that offer higher income levels and improved career prospects (Gjoni and Elezi 2023).

Digital technologies have also contributed to changes in work organisation and employment structures, with an increasing shift towards remote and freelance work models. Digital transformation enables the creation of efficient online platforms that connect service providers with tourists in real time, thereby facilitating more agile staffing arrangements and bridging regional employment gaps. As tourism-related enterprises expand their digital infrastructure, they generate rising demand for employees skilled in e-commerce, digital project management and ICT maintenance, ultimately fostering local and regional employment growth (Kalaj and Merko 2021).

Digital tourism as a driver of sustainable development

The development of sustainable tourism is a key goal for many destinations, ensuring that tourism growth does not come at the expense of environmental degradation, cultural loss or social inequality. In the context of northern Albania, sustainability is essential given the pristine natural environments, including mountains, rivers

and lakes, and the unique cultural heritage that together underpin its attractiveness as a destination.

Digitalisation and digital tourism can serve as catalysts for sustainable development, with a specific focus on the role of big data and other digital tools in tourism planning for sustainability. When applied carefully, digital technologies can contribute to all three pillars of sustainability: economic, environmental and sociocultural. From a financial perspective, digitalisation often improves efficiency and market reach, potentially leading to more stable and broadly distributed tourism revenues. In Albania, digital tourism can in this way help extend the tourist season by enabling off-season marketing, thereby generating additional income throughout the year, particularly for rural communities. Moreover, small local producers such as artisans, as well as tour guides and related actors, can reach tourists directly online, creating livelihood opportunities and fostering inclusive growth in line with the social dimension of sustainability.

Challenges and limitations

Despite the promising benefits of digital tourism transformation, several challenges must be addressed to harness in full its potential in northern Albania. One notable challenge is the existing gap in digital infrastructure between urban centres and rural regions. In many northern areas, poor internet connectivity, limited technical expertise and a lack of skilled personnel are hindering the effective implementation of digital initiatives (Karafili 2021; Kalaj and Merko 2021).

Additionally, the cost of digital transformation, particularly for the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that dominate the Albanian tourism sector, poses a significant barrier. Many tourism businesses face resource constraints that inhibit investments in advanced ICT solutions, digital marketing and staff training programmes (Kalaj and Merko 2021). This financial challenge is compounded by a generational digital divide wherein older employees and those with lower educational qualifications may struggle to adapt to new technologies, potentially leading to displacement or segmentation in the labour market (Satka et al. 2023).

Another limitation is the fragmented nature of policy and institutional support. Although several cross-border and national initiatives have been launched to support digital transformation, the lack of a coherent and integrated policy framework can cause inefficiencies while slowing down the adoption process (Mkiyes 2023). Furthermore, technological innovations such as artificial intelligence, IoT and virtual reality require constant updates and considerable maintenance, adding to operational costs and necessitating continuous investment in technical training and infrastructure upgrades (Gjika and Pano 2020).

Cultural factors also play a role in the adoption of digital tourism. In regions where traditional tourism practices are deeply rooted, stakeholders may exhibit a resistance to digital innovations, preferring established business models that rely on face-to-face interactions and conventional marketing methods. Overcoming this resistance requires not only technological investment but also a shift in mindset through awareness campaigns and demonstrative success stories that highlight the tangible benefits of digital engagement (Gjika and Pano 2020).

Conclusions and recommendations

The digitalisation of tourism is emerging as a transformative factor, even for developing destinations such as northern Albania. A review of the literature reveals that online platforms have played a crucial role in enhancing the visibility of destinations in the north of the country, driving increased tourist flows and integrating these areas into the national and global tourism economy. Local hotels and guesthouses, although mostly small family-run businesses, have begun to use ICT tools more effectively for marketing, sales and operational management. Meanwhile, social networks and review sites have given tourists a voice, too, fostering a culture of transparency and quality improvement in services.

Nevertheless, challenges remain evident. The lack of digital knowledge and skills among some operators in northern Albania may limit the optimal use of the opportunities offered by the internet. Certain accommodation businesses are still absent from online platforms, thereby missing out on potential clients. In addition, the digital infrastructure, despite recent improvements, still requires additional investment to support the development of tourism more fully.

The digital transformation of tourism in northern Albania is emerging as a critical driver of economic growth and labour market modernisation. New digital technologies and platforms are enhancing operational efficiency, increasing market access through personalised marketing and e-commerce, and driving significant improvements in customer engagement. These advances have resulted in economic benefits both directly, such as in terms of higher tourist revenues, and indirectly via a boost to related industries and the promotion of regional economic integration. Concurrently, the impact on the labour market is profound, as digital transformation creates new job opportunities, transforms traditional roles and necessitates the upskilling of the workforce in digital competencies.

Institutions such as the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, the National Agency for the Information Society (AKSHI), universities and international development partners should organise ongoing training programmes to enhance digital skills in the tourism sector. These sessions should address practical aspects such as the use of online booking platforms, the effective management of social media profiles, digital marketing techniques and online reputation management. Every accommodation structure or local attraction in northern Albania should ensure its presence on those platforms most widely used by tourists when searching for information. If a business is not yet registered on these, it should be prioritised for registration without delay. A multi-channel presence increases visibility and makes it easier for tourists to access the services on offer. While social media represents a powerful tool, standing out requires the addition of authentic and engaging content.

In conclusion, the digitalisation of tourism in northern Albania presents a horizon full of opportunities but requires coordinated action. Implementing these recommendations would help bridge the current gap, empowering local actors by helping them acquire the tools and knowledge necessary to compete in the modern market. Through this approach, northern Albania can develop a model of sustainable tourism that utilises technology to preserve and promote both natural and cultural heritage while simultaneously enhancing the wellbeing of local communities. This would

ensure that destinations such as Shkodra, Theth and Valbona serve as examples of how economic development and identity preservation can progress hand-in-hand in the digital era.

Overall, this analysis provides a solid foundation for understanding the interdependencies between digital tourism transformation, economic growth and labour market dynamics in northern Albania. Through coordinated efforts at policymaking, industry and community levels, digital transformation can catalyse the revitalisation of the tourism sector, create new opportunities for the workforce and foster sustainable regional development in the digital age.

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