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## **Editorial: Tourism of the future - opportunities and challenges of smart technologies and digitalization**

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In recent years, the tourism sector has undergone a significant transformation, driven by the rise of technology and digitalization. Whereas travel was once seen as an escape from everyday life, it is now augmented and enriched by a wide range of digital tools that shape every stage of the traveler's experience (Ahmad et al., 2023).

From this point of view, the pandemic has acted as a driving force behind this digitalization, both in terms of services offered by tourism actors and the openness of tourists toward digital tools, smart apps, and immersive experiences. Digitalisation has also served as a catalyst for numerous strategies aimed at enhancing the territorial resilience of the European Union in response to this unforeseen shock (Entin & Galushko, 2021). Various national and regional stakeholders have taken up this topic (Popescu et al., 2021), but we have to admit that no other sector was so eager to adopt smart and digital tools as tourism, where the effects of the pandemic have been substantial (Cehan & Iațu, 2023). At the same time, while the pandemic and travel restrictions have undoubtedly disrupted the sector, they also acted as a catalyst for changes that were on standby, or as an accelerator for changes already underway (Škare et al., 2021). The “window of opportunity”, strategically used by regional actors in some European territories (Bourdin et al., 2023), manifested in tourism as well, although its long-term impact is still to be assessed. With borders closed and international travel on hold, tourism actors have had to rethink their business models, customer approaches, and value chains. Digital technologies have become, by necessity, essential tools for maintaining a degree of business continuity during a period of uncertainty (Mensah & Boakye, 2023). This has even led some authors, such as Akhtar et al. (2021), to question the potential replacement of mass tourism by digital tourism. However, once the pandemic passed, the world started to regard the whole pandemic-induced digitalisation more as a tourism accelerator than a tourism changer.

This potential accelerator effect was indicated even before the pandemic started, especially in relation to the tourism multiplier effect (Pascariu & Ibănescu,

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2018), urban resilience (Bănică et al., 2020; Ibănescu et al., 2020), or the adoption of robots in the tourism industry (Ivanov et al., 2017; Ivanov et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the changes that occurred during the past years exceeded the expectations. The recent digitalisation “revolution” promoted virtual tours, enabling travel enthusiasts to explore remote destinations from the comfort of their own homes (Lu et al., 2022), boosted the online reservations and the contactless check-ins, while traceability applications have taken on unprecedented importance, making the customer journey smoother while guaranteeing increased safety (Monaco, 2021).

The image of today’s smart tourism is a direct result not only of the first steps undertaken in the early 2000’s, but also of this profound transformation that appeared following the pandemic. Those factors combined made the smart tourism a central pillar in the medium and long-term strategies of destinations worldwide (Otowicz et al., 2022). Smart tourism not only integrates digital tools, but also completely rethinks the tourism experience, based on a dynamic and personalized approach. It is about combining real-time information, connectivity, and data analytics to offer an enriched, tailor-made experience for tourists (Mehraliyev et al., 2019; Jovicic, 2019). In this way, smart destinations use technology to anticipate travellers’ needs, optimize resource management and improve the quality of services offered (Soares et al., 2022). Whether it features smart guidance according to travellers’ preferences, mobile apps that provide real-time information on local attractions, or recommendation systems based on artificial intelligence, smart tourism aims to make each experience unique and memorable (Gretzel, 2018). But beyond the individual experience, smart tourism also offers substantial benefits to destination managers and local businesses. The data collected enables a better understanding of tourist behaviour and preferences, leading to more informed decision-making and more targeted marketing strategies (Gretzel et al., 2015).

In some cases, digitalization induces a restructuring of the stakeholder system, where stakeholders are increasingly led to no longer operate in isolated silos, but, on the contrary, to build a territorial tourism ecosystem. The latter suggests complementarity, or even symbiosis, between them, where each component draws on the strengths of the others to create an enriched tourism experience. This need to collaborate in order to develop unique products stems from the fact that tourists, armed with digital tools, are better informed and more demanding, seeking authentic, tailor-made outcomes (Wang et al., 2020). As a result, the tourism economy is being challenged and pushed to position itself regarding the prioritisation of quality over quantity, and sustainability over short-term profit (Ferrer-Roca et al., 2021). Organisations, both governmental and private, are now faced with the need for greater collaboration to ensure that this new model of tourism benefits everyone.

Nevertheless, this revolution is not without its challenges. Increased reliance on technology raises questions about privacy, data security and ethics (Gössling, 2021). Moreover, beyond concerns about privacy and security, there is a risk that the rapid deployment of technological innovations in tourism will reinforce existing

inequalities rather than alleviate them. As Helsper (2021) points out, it is essential to ensure that these innovations do not marginalize certain groups. For example, older populations or individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds may find themselves at a disadvantage, lacking the necessary digital skills or access to these new technologies (Van Dijk, 2020). Furthermore, in some parts of the world, access to the Internet and advanced technologies is far from universal (Lucendo-Monedero et al., 2019). The future of tourism, as an accessible endeavour can be endangered by the unequal spread of digital means.

Fortunately, this change also offers new tools for the academic world, enabling the production of cutting-edge research more firmly grounded in profound societal changes. We are now able to better understand, to better foresee, and to have a wider image of the tourism sector than ever before. During the past years, the field observed a deeper understanding of tourist experiences (Stoleriu et al., 2019), more complex mechanisms were created, more precise techniques of analyses applied, taking academic research to heights never met before in this particular field.

Therefore, this special issue aims to shed light on the opportunities offered by smart tourism while also highlighting the potential challenges that lie ahead. This issue focuses on three main sub-topics to help us catch a glimpse of the *tourism of the future*. The first concerns digitalization, social media, and their economic impact on tourism, the second focuses on tourism experiences in the digital age, while the third looks at how territories are adapting to digitalization and new tourism trends.

## **1. Digitalization, social media and the economic impact on tourism**

This subtopic is covered by three papers from three different geographic regions, each one highlighting recent trends in the tourism industry. The paper *Can Digital Nomads Solve the Problem of Tourist Economy? The Case of Croatian Islands* explores the issue of nomad tourist as a solution for Croatian islands in reducing their dependency on “traditional” tourists. In a world where the lines between work and non-work are blurred, the digital nomads represent not only a niche, but, most likely, an important group for the economic actors. By drawing parallels between the concept of digital nomads and Richard Florida’s concept of the creative class, the authors found that Croatia excels in variables such as teaching tolerance to children and having people of another race as neighbours.

However, the country had lower scores in terms of immigrants or sexual minorities tolerance. In the end, the authors conclude that, while digital tourism can be considered a solution, there is no golden rule regarding the attractiveness for digital tourists, because the technological factors, the people tolerance, or the standards of services cannot by themselves ensure the success of a destination. A second paper, *Effects of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) drivers on customers’ behaviour* tackles a topic of uttermost importance in the current context.

The paper underlines that due to its popularity and widespread distribution, information from social media is the most familiar to users. The results of the paper show that the relationship between the information from social media and the customer's decision to choose a destination is not affected neither by age nor by experience, a result which offers food for thought for the tourism actors. The third paper of the sub-topic is dealing with the geography of social media. In *The Geography of Social Media Platform Attention for Tourist Attractions - Spatial Digital Data Analytics of Scenic Hot Spots in China*, the authors use spatial autocorrelation methods to assess the degree of match between spatial network attention and geographical distribution of scenic hotspots in China. It is revealed that a correlation exists, but only in the major coastal cities. The authors offer a series of strategic recommendations for tourism planning in order to shape the future tourism industry of China.

## 2. Tourism experiences in the digital age

This subtopic focuses on the more subjective dimension of the tourism sector. The issue of tourist experiences, sensations, and behaviour was until recently difficult to penetrate without committing serious resources for data collection. The emergence of social media, tourism-related platforms, and travel apps offer a myriad of opportunities for researchers in better understanding the individuals at the core of the entire phenomenon. The paper *Effect of social media on restaurant visit intention and willingness to pay more: Generation Z* was conducted to explore the effect of social media reviews on the intention to visit a restaurant and the willingness to pay more. The paper underlines the positive effect of attitude towards social media reviews on restaurant visit intention. On a similar note, the paper *Examining short-term rentals' influence on tourists' well-being using Airbnb reviews* reveals, through the use of Leximancer, that the guests' experiences in Bucharest Airbnb locations are declined according to five dominant themes. Besides the insights that the paper offers on the visitors' experience, it also shows that that hosts' friendliness contributes the most to guests' effective well-being. Finally, a third paper focused on *Unfolding visitor experiences at music festivals through online reviews* uncovers how social media can help us better understand the way tourists experience a festival in the modern era. The authors underline the huge advantage of social media for tourism research and stakeholders by offering them more diverse data, while at the same time warning about the dangers of uniformization of visitors' experiences. The paper also has the merit of focusing on the largest music festival in Eastern Europe, Untold, an unexplored territory for event studies.

### 3. Regional adaptation to digitalization and new tourism trends

The third sub-topic is zooming in on the ongoing process of adaptation of territories to the high speed of digital and environmental transformation. While the subject has been investigated profoundly during the last decade with or without the tourism component (Kebir et al., 2017; Dredge et al., 2019), the pandemic forced a rethinking of the way the triad tourism - digitalization - regional development operates (Bourdin et al., 2021; Bourdin et al., 2023). And this rethinking generated new strategies, new approaches, and even new directions for regional actors.

In fact, two of the three papers covering this subtopic are dealing with this particular issue. In *Tourism in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans of the EU Member States*, the authors use qualitative content analysis and comparative evaluation to assess the NRRPs based on three criteria: (1) Relevance to Tourism, (2) Support for Sustainable Tourism, and (3) Inclusion of Reform Components. While strategic EU documents, such as the European Agenda for Tourism 2030 and the Transition Pathway for Tourism area featured in all NRRPs, the place and importance of tourism seem to vary significantly between the established destinations (such as Spain and Greece, for example) and the emergent markets (such as Slovenia). The second paper, *European smart specialisation strategies (RIS3): catalysts for tourism innovations?* goes even further and analyses the 2014-2020 program through a three-step action research study. The authors identify a positive correlation between RIS3 initiatives and innovation in the tourism industry, which opens the door to uncountable opportunities for tourism sector in the XXI<sup>st</sup> century. At the same time, they underline that there is a need to adapt innovation policies to regional specificities in order to ensure their effectiveness, as the regional features may be the key to success (or failure) of tourism innovation. Finally, the third paper, *A nexus between foreign students, foreign medical students, international tourism and health tourism - Global trends and the case of Turkey* is looking into the hot trend of medical tourism and globalization through the lens of student mobilities globalization. The study suggests a possible development path and provides useful insights into the synergies between well-being and knowledge acquisition on a global scale.

In conclusion, the 9 papers manage to cover key theoretical concepts and solid case studies that can help us better understand the *tourism of the future*. How digital and how smart the tourism of the future will be, it is still a matter of debate, however it is certain that the recent changes generated a development path for a tourism sector like we never witnessed before. And it is, therefore, our duty, as researchers, to fully understand its challenges, its potential impacts, and its opportunities as well, if we want to keep it as accessible as possible.

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