

## DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND SMART PROMOTION IN RURAL TOURISM OF WESTERN ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** *The digital transformation of rural tourism has become an essential element for regional competitiveness and sustainable development. This paper analyzes the impact of digital tools and smart promotion strategies on the visibility of rural destinations in Western Romania. The study was based on an online questionnaire distributed to 96 respondents from Romania and other European countries, aiming to identify how tourists use digital platforms when choosing rural destinations. Results show that most tourists rely on social media, booking platforms, and Google reviews for decision-making. Although Western Romania possesses significant natural and cultural resources, respondents consider that its online promotion remains insufficient. The paper emphasizes the importance of social media engagement, online reviews, and high-quality visual content as effective tools for improving destination image and attracting younger audiences.*

**Key words:** *rural tourism, digital transformation, smart promotion, Western Romania, sustainable development*

### INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism in Romania has taken on a strategic role in supporting economic diversification, encouraging entrepreneurship, preserving traditions, and revitalizing rural communities. It contributes directly to job creation and indirectly to improving local infrastructure and community development [10]. Over the past decade, changes in consumer behavior, particularly among younger travelers, have been strongly influenced by digital technologies, leading to a shift in how tourists search for information, compare alternatives, and make bookings [14].

Digital transformation offers rural destinations opportunities to overcome traditional barriers such as reduced visibility, low accessibility, or limited financial resources for promotion. Online platforms, social networks, and smart tools (Google Reviews, booking platforms, influencer marketing) have become essential for shaping destination image and influencing travelers’ choices [8,9]. The National Strategy for Tourism Development 2023–2035 emphasizes the need to integrate digital technologies into tourism promotion and management at both regional and national levels.

Western Romania, including the counties of Timiș, Arad, Caraș-Severin, and Hunedoara, possesses significant tourism potential: mountain areas, natural parks, ethnographic villages, cultural heritage, and local gastronomy. However, previous studies show limited digitalization and insufficient online promotion [1,3]. Local tourism entrepreneurs face challenges such as lack of digital marketing skills, limited financial resources, and dependence on traditional promotional methods.

Given this context, the purpose of the paper is to identify how digital tools and smart promotion practices can strengthen the online visibility of rural tourism in Western Romania. By examining tourists’ preferences and online behavior, the study aims to provide recommendations for stakeholders and contribute to a more competitive and digitally integrated rural tourism sector.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study was conducted between October and November 2025 using an online questionnaire distributed via social media and e-mail. The form included 13 closed questions concerning demographics, travel habits, and perceptions of online promotion.

A total of 96 valid responses were collected. The sample comprised 87% aged 18–34, and represented Romania (64%), other EU countries (17%), non-EU Europe (6%), and outside Europe (14%).

Data were processed descriptively in Microsoft Excel. Average scores and frequency distributions were calculated to identify key behavioral patterns, in line with approaches used in previous LSMA tourism studies [5,6].

**RESEARCH RESULTS**

**Profile of Respondents**

Among the 96 participants, 90% had visited rural areas for tourism purposes and 95% had traveled to rural destinations in Romania. This shows strong interest and familiarity with rural tourism products [3].

**Table 1.**

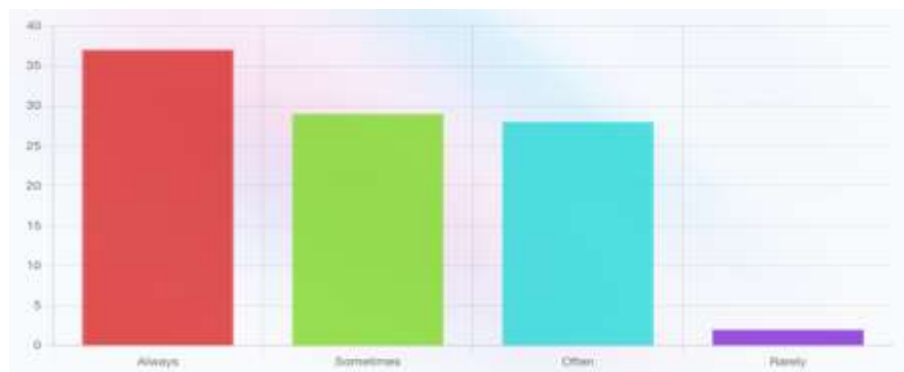
**Distribution of respondents by age and country**

Age group	Romania	Other EU countries	Non-EU Europe	Outside Europe	Total (%)
18-24	31%	8%	3%	6%	48%
25-34	28%	8%	-	2.8%	39%

*Source: Author's own processing (2025)*

**Use of Digital Tools**

Most respondents reported using digital tools sometimes or always when organizing rural trips (70%). Google Search, Booking.com, and social media platforms, especially Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, were most used.



**Figure 1. Frequency of digital tool use in travel planning**

Digital channels now dominate information gathering and decision-making processes, confirming European trends observed in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) [14].

**Importance of Online Factors**

Tourists rated five factors affecting destination choice. The highest average score was for authentic local experience (4.3), followed by price and accessibility (4.0) and online visibility (3.9).

Table 2.

## Average importance ratings of selection factors

Factor	Mean (1–5)	Interpretation
Authentic local experience	4.2	Very important
Price and accessibility	3.9	Important
Online visibility	3.8	Important
Easy online booking	3.6	Moderately important
Eco-friendly image	3.3	Moderately important

Source: Author's own calculations (2025)

Authenticity remains the dominant motivation, but online visibility is now a decisive component of competitiveness [8].

## Awareness and Perception of Western Romania

98% of respondents had heard about rural destinations in Western Romania, yet 90% evaluated their online promotion as poor or moderate.

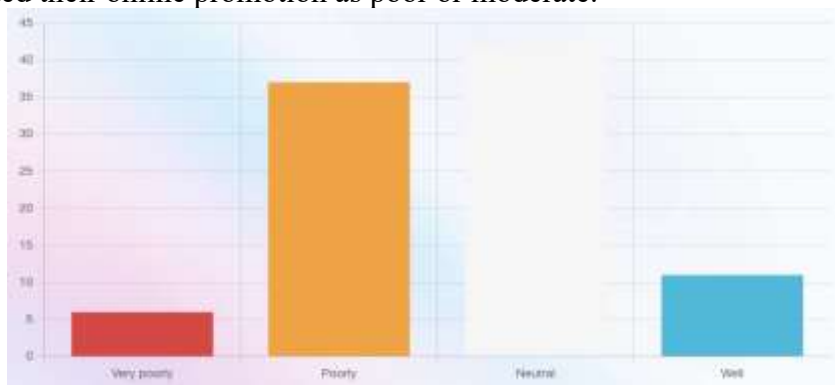


Figure 2. Perception of online promotion of Western Romanian destinations

This confirms findings from the Regional Development Strategy of the Centre Region 2021–2027, which notes low digital integration in tourism [11]. A coordinated local approach, aligned with GAL Timișul de Centru [15] and AFIR guidelines [12], could improve visibility.

## Digital Tools and Preferred Content

When asked about the most effective tools for rural promotion, social media pages (66%) were the top choice, followed by influencer collaborations (19%), Google Maps / Reviews (14%), and booking websites (1%). As for preferred content, photos and short videos (71%), visitor reviews (22%), and gastronomy and traditions (8%) were the most mentioned.

Table 3.

## Most effective digital tools and preferred content types

Category	Most mentioned option	% of respondents
Digital tools	Social media pages (Facebook, Instagram)	60%
	Google Maps / Reviews	13%
	Influencer collaborations	18%
	Online booking websites	1%
Preferred content	Photos and short videos	70%
	Visitor reviews/testimonials	22%
	Gastronomy and traditions	8%

Source: Author's own processing (2025)

Visual storytelling has become essential for attracting tourists, consistent with findings in recent LSMA studies [4,6].

Furthermore, the analysis highlights an emerging shift in how tourists perceive rural destinations in relation to digital accessibility. Many respondents emphasized that even when destinations offer attractive natural or cultural resources, the absence of updated online information reduces their willingness to visit. Several participants mentioned difficulties in finding clear details about accommodation availability, local events, or transportation options, elements that are increasingly expected to be accessible through digital channels. This illustrates that digital presence is no longer an added value but a baseline requirement for competitiveness in rural tourism. The growing influence of younger travelers, whose expectations revolve around rapid access to information and visually engaging content, reinforces the need for rural destinations in Western Romania to adopt more coherent digital strategies. Additionally, the survey results suggest that tourists respond positively to transparency and authenticity in online communication, preferring websites and social media pages that present real experiences, daily life in the community, and stories of local people. Such approaches not only enhance trust but also support the creation of an emotional connection with the destination, which is essential for encouraging repeat visits and long-term loyalty.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis confirms that digital transformation is central to rural tourism competitiveness in Western Romania. Tourists primarily rely on digital channels, and respondents report that online reputation and reviews are important in their travel decision-making process, consistent with findings that visual content and social media engagement strongly affect tourist decisions in rural areas [4,6]. Despite growing interest in authentic rural experiences, the online promotion of Western Romanian destinations remains insufficient, which aligns with previous studies highlighting low digital integration in Timiș County and other rural areas [1,3]. While some studies have emphasized influencer marketing as a major tool for rural tourism promotion [8], our results show that tourists prefer social media pages and visual storytelling, such as photos and short videos [4]. Comparatively, the use of Google reviews and booking platforms is important but secondary, reflecting broader European trends in digital tourism adoption [14].

Collaboration between public institutions, NGOs, and local entrepreneurs is required to:

- enhance social media visibility through professional content and influencer partnerships [12,15];
- improve Google presence and encourage user-generated reviews [4];
- offer online booking options for guesthouses and rural attractions [7];
- develop digital skills through AFIR and ADR training programs [12,13].

Smart promotion is therefore not merely a communication tool but a vital component of sustainable regional development in the digital age [11,7].

Given the rapid pace at which digital tools evolve, the effectiveness of rural tourism promotion will increasingly depend on the capacity of stakeholders to adapt and innovate. Continuous updates of online content, the adoption of modern communication formats such as short videos, and the integration of user-generated reviews into marketing strategies will be crucial. In addition, rural areas in Western Romania can benefit significantly from partnerships with universities, digital hubs, and regional development agencies, which can provide technical support and training. Strengthening these

collaborations will enable local businesses to better understand online consumer behavior, optimize their digital presence, and integrate smart technologies into daily operations. Ultimately, digital transformation should be approached as an ongoing process rather than a one-time intervention, ensuring that rural destinations remain visible, competitive, and aligned with the expectations of contemporary travelers..

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