

## Editorial of special issue

# Transforming Journeys: Digital Pathways in Marketing, Tourism, and Hospitality

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## 1 Introduction

In recent decades, the tourism sector has undergone a profound transformation, driven by digitalisation and rapid technological advances. The widespread adoption of digital technologies, such as mobile applications, online booking systems, social networks, and content-sharing platforms, has transformed consumer behaviour and expectations (ALKasassbeh et al., 2025). At the same time, it has also redefined business models, planning processes, and management strategies of destinations and tourism organisations (Kromidha & Robson, 2021; Santarsiero et al., 2024; Sigala, 2018). Digitalisation is now a structuring factor in how the sector positions itself in the face of the challenges of competitiveness, innovation, and sustainability, far from being restricted to a purely operational dimension. In terms of demand, it has transformed the tourist experience by enabling visitors to plan, customise, and enjoy their trips in a more interactive way (Tandafatu et al., 2024). They can access real-time information, digital services, and immersive experiences, thereby enhancing their visit experience and boosting satisfaction (Garima & Dharmendra, 2023).

Technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, recommendation systems, social listening tools, and advanced data analysis have emerged, opening up new possibilities for understanding trends, segmenting consumer profiles, and supporting decision-making. At the same time, the growing relevance of social media,

the impact of online reviews, and the need to optimise digital communication and conversion channels (Labanauskaitė et al., 2020) reflect how central the digital space has become in shaping tourist experiences. While this scenario highlights the opportunities arising from digitalisation, it also raises awareness of the associated risks, such as the proliferation of unreliable information (António et al., 2023) and privacy challenges (Martin & Murphy, 2017). It is also important to recognise that access to, and the capacity to incorporate, these technologies is not uniform. While large companies in the sector have greater resources to invest in digital innovation, small businesses face significant constraints that can limit their ability to adapt to these transformations. Indeed, organisational preparedness, willingness, and readiness in human resources, technological resources, and top management positively and significantly affected perceived ease of use of e-marketing (Misganaw & Singh, 2020).

In this context, academic research plays a vital role in providing critical insights into these processes, helping to identify trends and to understand their economic, social, and cultural implications. It also enables the development of strategies to support decision-making by companies, destinations, and public sector organisations.

This special issue of the *European Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Recreation* seeks to contribute to the ongoing collective reflection by bringing together a selection of articles that comprehensively and multidimensionally address the impact of digitalisation on tourism and hospitality. The variety of methods and viewpoints employed by the authors illustrates the range of possible approaches in this field and highlights the importance and timeliness of the debate surrounding digital transformation in this sector. The following sections present summaries of the published articles, grouped into four main thematic areas that reflect distinct yet complementary trends in the study of interactions between technology, tourism, and hospitality.

Of the papers submitted to this special issue, twelve were ultimately accepted for publication in the journal. Upon careful review, we identified four main thematic areas into which the accepted papers fall: (1) the role of

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**Table 1.** Summary of the approaches, methods and objectives used by the authors

| Approach     | Author                                          | Objectives                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Quantitative | Carrasco, & Esteves                             | Uses LLMs to perform aspect-based sentiment analysis (ABSA) on large datasets to understand customer opinions.                                                                                    |
|              | Fialho, & Marreiros                             | Focuses on how two digital marketing strategies - visibility and webcare - influence electronic word-of-mouth marketing.                                                                          |
|              | Parkhomenko, & Vilčeková                        | Assesses the impact of digital technologies on the economic efficiency of agritourism in the Slovak Republic.                                                                                     |
|              | Orts-Cardador                                   | Provides a comprehensive review of literature trends and influential publications in a specific field.                                                                                            |
|              | Pego                                            | Explores the use of information systems and the use of circular economy in the daily practice of Rural Tourism organisations in the Algarve region.                                               |
|              | Santos, Perdígão Ribeiro, Correia, & deMatos    | Assesses students' digital skills for responsible interaction with digital content and identifies differences in digital competencies by sociodemographic factors.                                |
|              | Sayed                                           | Collects and analyses customer data from a random sample to identify trends and preferences in the fast-food industry.                                                                            |
| Qualitative  | Amaral                                          | Systematically observes and analyses the content of accommodation business websites to evaluate their communication of slow tourism dimensions.                                                   |
|              | Lazrak, Tissafi, Tor-kington, & Correia         | Explores how Moroccan hotels use digital platforms to engage customers and foster service innovation.                                                                                             |
|              | Lopes, & Pereira                                | Optimises conversions in online channels to boost digital conversion rates by proposing a multidimensional framework to improve Conversion Rate Optimisation (CRO).                               |
|              | Pardo-López, Cortés- García, & Cerqueira- Lopes | Aims to enhance effective and sustainable planning by analysing social media discussions and assessing user perceptions of the destination by tracking searches and references of relevant terms. |
|              | Rosa, Carrilho, & Martins                       | Examines how the mainstream news media frame the metaverse and immersive technologies (VR, AR and XR) in the context of tourism across major European markets.                                    |

social media in the restaurant sector; (2) digital distribution channels and social media in tourism; (3) digital marketing strategies in non-urban tourism contexts; and (4) the digital competencies of tourism and hospitality professionals.

## 2 Methods used within the articles

We found the articles to be quite eclectic and multi-dimensional in their approaches, methods, and aims, thus demonstrating a wide range of model possibilities for future research. Out of the twelve articles published here, seven follow a quantitative approach and five apply a qualitative methodology (Table 1). Some deal with large amounts of data (e.g., Carrasco & Esteves, 2026; Fialho, 2026; Sayed, 2026), whereas others rely on smaller amounts of questionnaire data (Pego, 2026) or content analysis of textual data (Amaral, 2026; Lopes & Pereira, 2026) to provide a more in-depth analysis of the topic at hand. Table 1 summarises the approaches and objectives of the various studies published here.

## 3 An overview of the articles

Together, the twelve articles in this special issue address various issues and approaches related to digital marketing. They explore how consumer behaviour online can be deconstructed and analysed to inform the planning, policymaking and decision-making of stakeholders in different contexts and settings. The articles also examine how professionals and businesses must master digital competencies and tools. Consequently, the articles offer fresh perspectives on this vital area of business and marketing.

**Jaime Orts-Cardador** focuses on how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is used in tourism to help policymakers and Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) understand the ongoing investigation and identify the main applications of AI in tourism. The author accomplishes this by applying a bibliometric analysis to 720 documents published over the past decade. The results show evidence of research on ‘machine learning, deep learning and artificial neural networks in tourism’, ‘use of robots and AI in tourism’, ‘sustainability and AI in tourism’, and ‘acceptance of chatbots in tourism’. In short, AI is a mechanism

for managing tourist influx, improving sustainable urban development, or improving efficiency in the exploitation of natural resources.

Three articles are dedicated to online reviews. Two of these articles focus on restaurants and provide data and potential tools for policymakers and restaurant managers, while the third explores the influence of online visibility on word-of-mouth marketing (eWoM) in rural tourism.

**Paulo Carrasco** and **Pedro Esteves** analyse online customer reviews for restaurant owners and managers using Large Language Models (LLMs) for Aspect-Based Sentiment Analysis (ABSA). They are particularly interested in demonstrating the precision of AI compared with human evaluation. The purpose of this study is to implement a restaurant recommendation system tailored for entrepreneurs within the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (AML), utilising LLMs for ABSA of online customer reviews. The results prove the viability of using LLMs to extract, identify, and classify relevant attributes for sentiment analysis, when compared with human evaluation. The authors arrive at the crucial conclusion that LLMs are a solid tool for interpreting large volumes of textual review data, thus allowing the design of a prototype decision-support tool that offers stakeholders competitive and detailed insights. As such, this investigation provides a practical application of LLMs and ABSA for strategic investment decisions in the highly competitive restaurant sector.

Within the same broad topic of the influence of online customer reviews on customer behaviour, Mohammed Sayed analyses the problems posed by the growing prevalence of fake reviews, focusing on the impact of fake online restaurant reviews on customer behaviour and the fast-food industry in Egypt. Perhaps unsurprisingly, findings demonstrate that fake reviews notably affect customer trust, brand reputation, and purchasing decisions. The author highlights the importance of these results for stakeholders and the broader implications of misinformation in the digital marketplace. Additionally, this investigation offers an initial framework for future research to further explore the links between trust, reputation, and decision-making in the restaurant industry.

**Luís Filipe Fialho** and **Cristina Galamba Marreiros** study Alentejo rural tourism lodgings (Portugal), a relatively under-researched type of business which is highly dependent on online platforms. They examine how web care and online visibility influence word-of-mouth marketing (eWoM) on online travel agencies (OTAs) in terms of the rating, volume, and valence (negative or positive) of reviews. They also examine how these factors indirectly influence KPIs (key performance indicators), such as occupancy rate (OR), revenue per available room (RevPar),

and gross revenue (GR). Netnography is applied to analyse the web pages of rural tourism units on Booking.com, followed by a questionnaire sent to selected companies to collect information about their KPIs and their use of tools that increase online visibility, including the Genius and Preferred Partners programmes, as well as the Visibility Booster tool.

The second cluster includes four papers whose object of study, broadly speaking, is digital distribution channels and social media in tourism.

Aware that technological advancements have transformed e-commerce practices and that competitiveness demands effective strategies to convert visitors into buyers, **Ângela Lopes** and **Paulo Pereira** focus on optimising conversions in online channels to understand how to boost digital conversion rates. Bridging academic literature and market practice, their study explores tactics used by digital marketing professionals to optimise conversions in online channels. They conduct a thematic content analysis of 50 publicly available blog posts and web articles written by digital marketing professionals. They identified hundreds of tactics and organised them into several categories and seven key themes. By proposing a multidimensional framework that integrates these strategic themes, their findings enhance the understanding of Conversion Rate Optimisation (CRO). From a managerial perspective, it offers digital marketers a flexible set of context-sensitive tactics, encouraging continuous testing and optimisation in digital strategies.

**Maria Carmen Pardo-López**, **Mónica Cecilia Cortés García**, and **Bianca Sofia Cerqueira-Lopes**' research looks at social media as a decision-making and planning tool for sustainability and as a tool for digital diagnosis. Their study explores the application of the interesting concept of online social listening as a digital tool for diagnosing tourism destinations, with the objective of improving it and achieving more effective and sustainable planning. The paper employs two social listening tools to analyse social media discussions and assess user perceptions of the destination by tracking searches and references to relevant terms. They conclude that digital tools enhance decision-making by offering a deeper understanding of tourism dynamics, improving knowledge about destination perception, and, as such, stakeholders, such as municipalities, can assess strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities, thus allowing for informed strategic planning.

**Marlene Cristina Neves Rosa**, **Mónica Kopplin Carrilho**, and **Rui Alberto de Freitas Martins** examine how the mainstream news media frame the metaverse and immersive technologies within the tourism sector across major European markets. A qualitative content

analysis is applied to 126 open-access news articles from digital newspapers in six European countries (2024-2025). Adopting a media framing perspective, they examine both the frequency of themes and how journalistic narratives construct meanings around immersive technologies in tourism. The study interprets the patterns of representation, emphasis, and association through which the meta-verse and related technologies are positioned in discourse across major European markets.

**Youssra Lazrak, Amina el Idrissi Tissafi, Kate Tor-kington, and Marisol B. Correia** conduct semi-structured interviews to investigate key aspects of digital co-creation in the Moroccan hotel sector. These aspects included service and product personalisation, active client engagement in service delivery, the role of digital innovations in improving the customer experience, and current challenges such as digital literacy gaps and data privacy concerns.

The third cluster of papers is dedicated to Digital marketing strategies in non-urban tourism contexts.

Within this scope, **Ana Pego** analyses rural tourism in the Algarve applying the concept of circular economy; the author considers this notion a good indicator that the rural market has improved its competitiveness and resilience, and using a quantitative approach, explores how rural tourism has increased its competitiveness by relying on the circular economy and information systems. In turn, **Marta Amaral** explores the Baixo Alentejo region in Southern Portugal, focusing on rural accommodation and examining digital marketing strategies for tourism that align with the principles of the Slow Movement and Slow Tourism. Utilising a qualitative methodological approach, her empirical research begins with a literature review and includes systematic observations of accommodation business websites. The study employs content analysis to investigate key aspects of website communication, such as mission statements and values, introductory messages, and the offerings of experiences, activities, and products. Additionally, the research analyses social media communication strategies, particularly the commercial posts made by entrepreneurs on Facebook.

The final cluster comprises two papers which emphasise the vital importance of digital competencies for professionals in the tourism sector.

**Nataliia Parkhomenko** and **Lucia Vilčeková** demonstrate the central role of digital capabilities and human capital in enhancing rural economic resilience and competitiveness. They do this by highlighting that agritourism performance now depends on farms' ability to adopt and manage digital tools effectively, rather than on destination attractiveness alone. They identify the key drivers of farm-level profitability by applying a panel data

regression model that combines regional statistical indicators, survey-based measures of digital skills and digital platform metrics for the period 2022-2023. The study reveals that the intensity of online booking usage and the level of farmers' digital skills are the most significant predictors of income growth.

Due to the widening gap between the adoption of new technologies by tourism organisations and the digital skills of their workforces, there is an increasing demand for professionals who possess strong digital competence in today's rapidly changing societal landscape. **Margarida C. Santos, Filipa Perdigão Ribeiro, Marisol B. Correia, and Nélson de Matos** address this problem by evaluating the digital literacy of future Tourism and Hospitality professionals through a questionnaire survey of Tourism and Hospitality undergraduates to assess their perceptions of their own digital skills.

## 4 Final remarks

The papers in this issue offer a contemporary approach to research, making a significant contribution to the bodies of knowledge in Digital Marketing and Tourism by exploring relevant and current topics, such as the use of LLMs to understand customer opinions, the application of social listening tools to diagnose tourism destinations, and digital competence amongst tourism professionals. The research also delves into practical and conceptual implications, from analysing trends in the food industry to evaluating how businesses communicate slow tourism dimensions. Furthermore, the papers explore the application of information systems and the circular economy in rural tourism, as well as the use of machine learning for consumer segmentation. The variety of methods, including qualitative approaches such as thematic content analysis and quantitative methods such as bibliometric analysis, demonstrates the diverse and robust nature of the research presented. We hope readers will find these articles as engaging and thought-provoking as we found the process of assembling this special issue.

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