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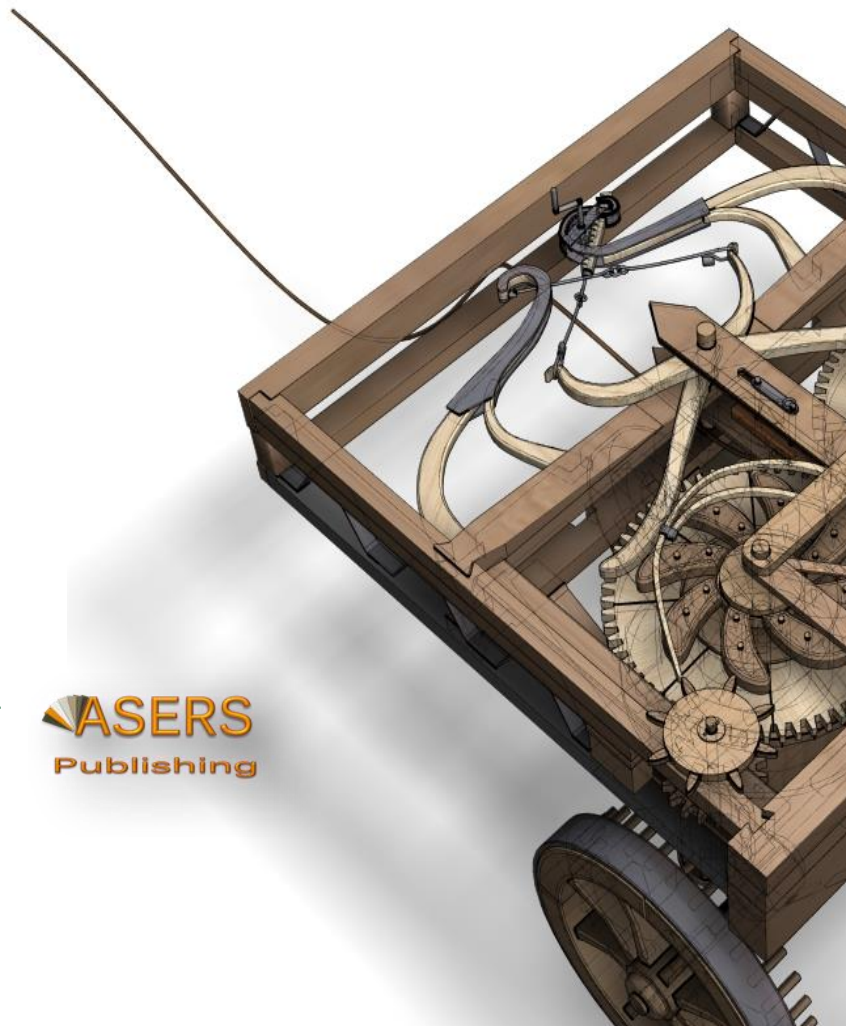
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Smart Technology Effecting Tourism Development in Albania

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Abstract:

The concept of tourism represents a wide field of research and development, especially considering the global dimensions it is taking. In Albania, the tourism sector has become one of the most important sectors of economic development, especially in recent years when attention has increased in the international arena. The financial and social impact has begun to be experienced, when seeing that almost all figures in the tourism components show growth. The earthquake of November 26, 2019, and especially the isolation from the COVID-19 pandemic, had a negative impact, that limited the development and investment capacities in this sector. As a result of the great opportunities that our country offers in the field of tourism, technology has played a no less important role, especially for promotion to foreigners. The standardization of services has come as a result of awareness on development opportunities, but also as a result of constant demands and models borrowed from other countries, where digital transformation also undoubtedly plays a role. Another element affected in this study is the digitalization of business in the provision method of the tourism product. Specifically, tel_Albania, as a leading company in the country, has launched the tel_Business platform, by aiming to contribute to the fulfilment of the concepts of smart tourism and e-tourism.

Keywords: Albania; smart tourism; strategic planning; economic development.

JEL Classification: O32; O35; Z32.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is the importance of the tourism sector for the economic development of Albania, and the ways in which technology has influenced its promotion even in the international arena. In addition, another positive effect that technology has offered is the discovery of new opportunities in this sector as well as the conveniences in traveling.

The attention that the tourism sector has received in recent years has been accompanied not only by the increase in the number of tourists, but also by the increase of awareness by the locals to offer higher hospitality capacities. With the economic development that has characterized the field of tourism, the opportunity to

experiment and develop other alternative forms of tourism has increased, where in addition to mountainous and coastal tourism, a special attention has gained natural tourism. In recent years, according to official data, we have an increase in the number of accommodation capacities and tourist services. Also, the way of running a business in this sector has changed positively, offering better conditions, compared to a few years ago (Boes *et al.* 2015); (Su 2011).

Although Albania, as a developing country, still lags behind for the full integration of technology in support of tourism development, in recent years the demands of mainly foreign tourists have given rise to the need to see technology as a key to success. The idea of implementing technology in tourism, came as a result of the needs and opportunities that the sector has to improve and further develop, in order to achieve the right efficiency and height (WTTC, Albania 2020).

In Albania, we can say that there is still a relatively low awareness regarding the implementation of technology in support of the provision of facilities for domestic and foreign tourists. However, the experience of other countries, cities known for their high number of tourist sites and the millions of tourists who visit them every day, can be a good example to follow (WTTC, Albania 2020). Only the city of Tirana can be seen in these steps, which has often taken initiatives for the development of innovative projects, where the focus is on its transformation into a Smart City (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2018).

Also, an important role in creating the idea for the integration of technology in tourism, has been the innovative company tel_Albania, which has often taken initiatives to find alternative ways to help promote Albanian tourism. Referring to the secondary data used on the active role of tel_Albania in Albania, the support with the latest technology of Albanian business operating in the field of tourism is also in focus. In the new dimensions where Albanian tourism is today, not only the concept of natural values is included, but of course focus is given also to the values of the tourist product offered in the appropriate way.

1. Literature Review

Technology has a significant impact on people's lives due to its constant and rapid developments, and thus can be considered as an unpredictable and essential force for the reality where we live. New technology development and the digital transformation of society have led to tourism in the upper social and economic dimensions (Ktona *et al.* 2022). Basically, tourism and the hospitality business always face new challenges and opportunities in terms of technology. The number of innovative enterprises increases rapidly, and they are developing at a rapid pace (Tsenina *et al.* 2022). The development of innovative processes reflects the general state of the economy and is conditioned by socio-economic transformations. The main context of these changes is associated with the formation of a new, entrepreneurial culture, the order and methods of coordination and interaction between the subjects of innovation (Vikulenko *et al.* 2021). Technological innovations are on the ground of new approaches and innovative business models in the tourism industry. Especially, since the emergence of the Internet of Things (IOT), travel and tourism have been most commonly transformed sectors (Yalçinkaya *et al.* 2018).

The rapidly growing importance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and specifically e-business, is a development that needs to be taken seriously and turned into a priority. Not only the Internet and Web 1.0, but also Web 2.0 and the entire social networking environment has had a major impact and has changed the tourism industry to a great extent (Boes *et al.* 2015). At the same time, technological infrastructures like sensors, cloud computing services, smartphones, radio frequency identification (RFID) and Wi-Fi can also play a vital role in Smart Tourism Development (Masseno and Santos 2018). An attempt to provide Smart Tourism services, such as recommender systems that aim to suggest the most suitable tourist withdrawal based on user profile (Gavalas *et al.* 2014).

Smart technology has a crucial role to play in the competitiveness of tourism organizations and destinations. Smart cities exist only when the populations have high livelihood and sustainable economic growth (Buhalis and Amaranggana 2014). It empowers consumers to identify, personalize and purchase tourism products, and supports the globalization of industry by providing tools for the development, management and distribution of offerings worldwide (Buhalis and O'Connor 2005).

Different authors are using a broader approach to the concept of smart tourism, including in this concept not only the technological dimension, but also the institutional and human one. From this perspective smart tourism will use technology to improve the quality of services, marketing, cooperation of all tourism stakeholders, aiming at the improvement of the quality of life of the local community and sustainable development of a destination (Boboli and Muça 2021). In many ways, smart tourism can be seen as a logical progression from traditional tourism and more recently e-tourism in that the groundwork for the innovations and the technological

orientation of the industry and the consumers were laid early with the extensive adoption of information and communication technologies (ICT) in tourism (Gretzel *et al.* 2015).

A smart tourism destination should be an innovative place accessible to all visitors who can experience an improved, more interactive and higher- quality travel, it should also improve resident's quality of life (Garsia *et al.* 2015). Becoming a smart tourism destination involves the smart use of ICT to create a sustainable and competitive tourism destination, which will ultimately promote public value creation within the host community (Cavalheiro *et al.* 2021). When it comes to creating a "Smart Tourism" Destination, a number of challenges arise such as how to personalize the content presented to a user, what are the most appropriate resources for data collection, how to extract this data implicitly or explicitly, privacy issues, etc. (Kontogianni and Alepis 2020)

In recent years, there have been a number of research efforts, concepts, challenges and concerns discussed in Intelligent Tourism and from the analysis made so far these studies in Albania lack a fact which serves as an impetus for in-depth research in this field. As well Albanian Government has stimulated the development of the smart tourism not only in urban areas, but as well in rural ones through the 100 villages program (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development 2018).

The concept of tourism today is not just a social phenomenon, where people move to different destinations. Undoubtedly, that is much more than just a deliberate movement of residents, and that is why in recent years, the tourism sector has taken on a special importance globally. The ongoing transformations in various aspects in the field of tourism services lead to an increase in the importance of tourism in the development of the national economy, which is due to a change in the mechanism of functioning of the tourism industry, a complex impact on the economy of other industries (Temiraliyeva *et al.* 2021). Albania, although with tremendous opportunities to offer, has in fact become aware of its tourism potential too late. After half a century of isolation during the communist dictatorship, the first signs of the provision of genuine tourist services began. However, we can say that in the first years of transition, accompanied by other external factors, tourism in Albania was still very primitive, mainly characterized by occasional movements of foreigners and generally by locals. It also had a seasonal character, and the conception actually on tourism was coastal and mountainous tourism in some areas. Even today, tourism in Albania still continues to be seasonal for some areas, with the exception of mainly urban centers which have development opportunities almost throughout the year (Ministry of Tourism and Environment 2018).

Unfortunately, transition governments have done very little in terms of investing in this sector. Specifically, we can say that only in the last decade, public and institutional engagement, managed to create a strategy to turn this sector into one of the pillars with the highest priority for economic growth of the country, the fruits of which we can say that they are feeling in recent years. According to data from INSTAT (2022), almost all figures of tourism components in the annual analysis of the last five years are positive. Tourism initiatives have increased, with the development of alternative forms of tourism such as mountain tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, among others. Tourist expenditure plays a crucial role in the economic growth of the economy (Boboli and Muça 2021).

2. Methodology

Secondary data were used extensively for this study. The information obtained on tourism opportunities in Albania, is not only as a result of personal experiences during the developed trips, but also as part of the perception from various literature on the field.

Some of the secondary data are taken from the long-term plans of the Ministry of Tourism and Environment. In addition, statistics and interpretations of information have been generated by INSTAT (2020). A comparative methodology has been used between the data of recent years, highlighting the growth and importance that the tourism sector has occupied in the economic growth of the country. In addition to secondary data, the project also used primary data, which consists of conducting a questionnaire with questions related to the issue of tourism and the importance of technology in travel. The questionnaire was built in the format of a Google Form, distributed online to about 100 respondents, mostly young people, as given the difficult situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, field surveying has been extremely difficult. A Google Form is shared via email and all the collected responses are organized in a Google Spreadsheet stored in Google Drive (Haddad, Rami J., Youakim Kalaani 2014). For the use of information on how technology has changed and re-dimensioned travel and the provision of tourist services, we have relied on data obtained mainly from foreign literature.

The reason for using the age limit is more related to the fact that the questionnaire was constructed in such a way as to integrate the tourism sector and obviously the impact of technology on its new dimensions. As a result, the target group was, in a way, destined to be at a relatively young age, responsible for themselves and

their finances, as well as sufficiently informed about the technology. If different, then the transparency of the results would be violated and the questionnaire would lose its purpose. From the distribution list, the age of the respondents was between 20 – 40 years old, of which 57% female and 43% male. They are Albanian citizens and residing in Albania.

We used empirical methods to analyze the problems related to the smart tourism practices in Albania. The most appropriate, model from empirical analyze is the descriptive statistics which include:

Cross-tabulations and contingency tables

Qualitative data of different variables describing the smart tourism in Albania.

Qualitative research thus refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things.” (Berg B., 2007).

3. Survey Results

The main focus of this study was related to the challenges that Albanian tourism is facing to the technologic changes. From a functional point of view, the questionnaire achieved its purpose, to highlight the problems and challenges that remain in the future for improvement purposes. For the sake of truth there is still a lot of work to be done in practice, in order to achieve the maximum utilization of the tourism potentials that Albania offers, but with the help of technology and the right combination of the best innovative models and preservation of originality traditional, investing in this area will be a success.

Regarding the position as consumers of tourism products and services, respondents were asked about their personal assessments of the infrastructure in general and the tourism components. In a general analysis, the assessments were generally positive towards the developments in tourism, and the trend of access to technology and the way it has affected the progress of the tourism experience, has increased consumer satisfaction.

Asked about personal assessment, (1 – 10), if they would like to visit Albania again in the last 10 years, 46.5% of respondents expressed the maximum, to visit and spend the holidays again in our country during the next decade. While 15.2% of respondents have made a rating of 7 points, expressing some uncertainty.

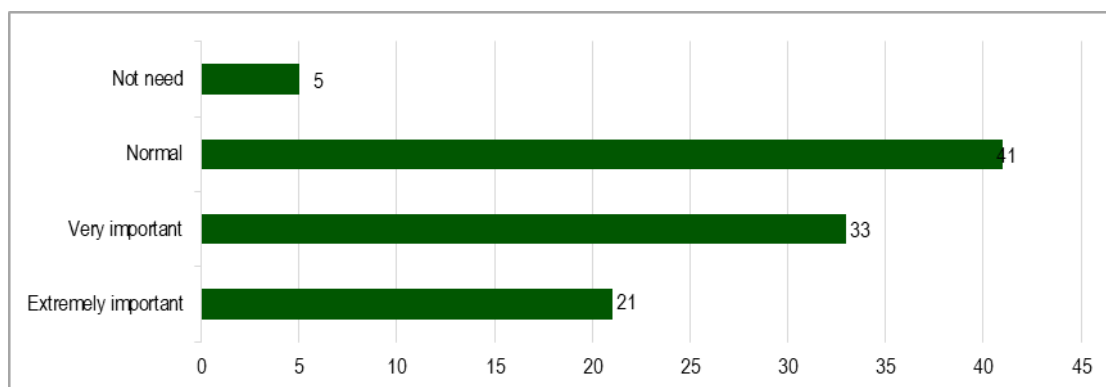
The positive evaluation in the dominant part of the respondents is closely related to the evaluation they have expressed for the natural and cultural values that our country offers. Most respondents rated these resources to the maximum. Specifically, 68% answered with 10 points and 10% rated it with 9 points.

In terms of infrastructure in general, respondents have been somewhat skeptical, where most of them giving an average to low rating. As it is already known, road infrastructure is one of the main concerns in the development of tourism, and this is a real reason that explains the low ratings in the questionnaire. Also, public transport in the country leaves more to be desired, another reason that justifies the evaluation with 5 points of about 29% of respondents, and only 2% have evaluated with 10 points. While regarding the tourist infrastructure, accommodation, restaurants, only 8% out of 100 respondents rated it with 10 points. Meanwhile, most of them (about 20%) have given a rating of 6 points. Their greatest concentration has been between the evaluation with the scale 5 – 8 points.

Regarding this concern, although the analysis of the results is done based on the selected sample of 100 people, in general the lack of proper standards and little experience in the development and management of tourists, may be essential factors to justify these results. Even in the field or online forums, most users mention the fact that the tourist accommodation infrastructure in Albania still has a lot of work to do towards standardization. Technology and digital transformation in this case should be seen as allies in increasing the quality of the product or service provided. About 58%, chose the option of accommodation in private apartments, versus 42% who chose accommodation in hotels/ resorts, we can confirm the analysis that Albanians still continue to remain somewhat traditional in the way of running tourism. Of course, another logical reason may be the fact that, in Albania, the concept of standard hotels and luxury resorts is relatively late, and the cost of the few that are offered in our destinations, with All Inclusive services is relatively high, and not easily affordable by everyone.

Regarding the use of the Internet in their travels and the importance or need that people have had during their visits to various destinations, most respondents have an almost positive assessment of the use of the Internet, as a necessary element during their travels. About 41% had a normal access to the Internet, for 33% of respondents the Internet was very important, and for 21% it was extremely important internet access. As such, in the majority, almost 95% of them, see it as necessary, and only 5% of respondents have not felt the need for internet access (Figure 1).

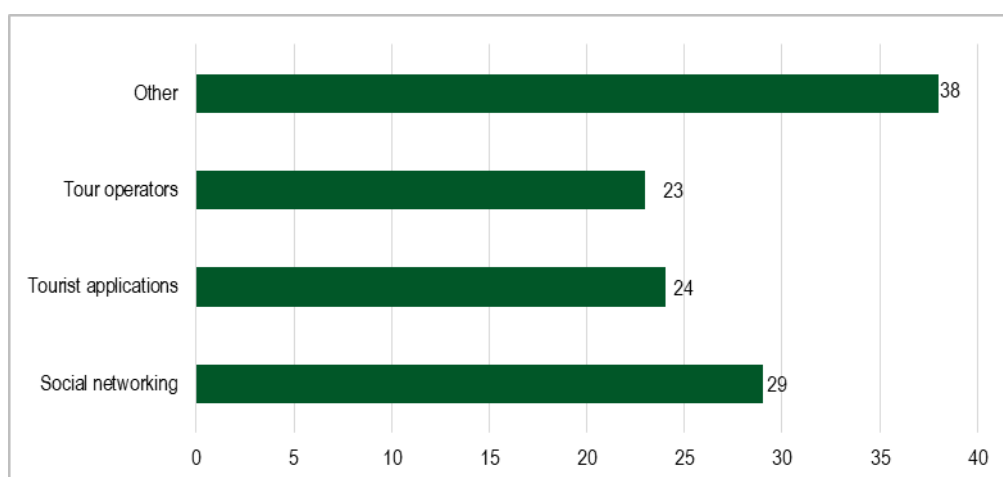
Figure 1. Importance of Internet access during travel



Source: Study results

To see how technology affects the stimulation of tourism, we started with how people make their holiday bookings. The given alternatives aimed at the role of technology, to prove once again practically the new dimensions where tourism has shifted today. Among the diverse distribution in response, the majority of respondents, about 38%, have chosen the "other" option, meaning alternatives by phone, with references, etc. As can be seen from the figure 2, 29% of them have chosen the social networking option for vacation or travel bookings, 24% through tourist applications and 23% through tour operators (Figure 2).

Figure 2. How to make reservations



Source: Study results

Another interpretation that can be made on this result is that the respondents in this survey, given their age and proper access to the Internet, prefer to do their own planning and booking of their vacations or trips. Regarding the role of technology, the next important question for the analysis had to do with the use of finances during their bookings and vacations. Out of 100 respondents, most of them, about 66% stated that they used cash money for reservations or on trips. And only 37% of them made reservations in Albania online. Of course, this is a topic that requires attention, not only in terms of tourism. Albanians, given the fact that most businesses do not offer opportunities for online payments, due to lack of full integration in the digital field, but also for various reasons that have accompanied many uncertainties in various phenomena, they do not have much faith in performing online payments. This is reflected not only in tourism, but also in other sectors. This does not make Albanians traditional in selection, but the issue of online payments still remains a kind of taboo phenomenon, when most prefer cash money, to avoid commissions or percentages that are held as a result of online services.

Regarding Mobile Internet in their travels, 100 respondents were asked about the satisfaction rating they had on the service in question, and most of them, about 58% expressed a normal rating, with a positive upward trend. Specifically, 21% of the other respondents gave a high rating where they expressed very satisfied, and 11% extremely very satisfied. Meanwhile in total, only 11% had remained dissatisfied. The normal satisfaction trend, of course, may also be related to the area where the respondents have traveled and their access to the use of telephone and Mobile Internet.

In the above descriptive analysis, there is a need to correlate the survey indicators for a more in-depth analysis process, in order to draw long-term conclusions. By means of the pivot table, the correlation of the indices taken from the sample of 100 persons, can give us more important results and interpretations during the analysis.

The first table presents the combination of primary data such as age, gender and assessment of the tourist infrastructure.

Table 1. Relationship between age, gender and assessment of tourist infrastructure

Female (57%)							
25-29 years	27.00%	20-24 years	18.00%	30-34 years	11.00%	35-39 years	1.00%
8	6.00%	5	4.00%	4	2.00%	7	1.00%
5	5.00%	6	4.00%	1	2.00%		
6	4.00%	8	3.00%	5	2.00%		
7	3.00%	10	2.00%	9	1.00%		
3	3.00%	7	2.00%	2	1.00%		
2	2.00%	1	1.00%	10	1.00%		
1	2.00%	3	1.00%	7	1.00%		
10	1.00%	9	1.00%	8	1.00%		
4	1.00%						
Male (43%)							
25-29 years	27.00%	20-24 years	9.00%	30-34 years	4.00%	35-39 years	3.00%
6	8.00%	7	2.00%	10	1.00%	6	1.00%
8	4.00%	8	2.00%	6	1.00%	9	1.00%
4	3.00%	6	2.00%	4	1.00%	7	1.00%
5	3.00%	5	1.00%	5	1.00%		
10	2.00%	10	1.00%				
9	2.00%	2	1.00%				
7	2.00%						
3	2.00%						
1	1.00%						

Source: Study results

The table shows the indicators according to the distribution of the assessment on the tourist infrastructure. Out of 100 respondents, 57% of them are female and 43% of them are male. The age group that constitutes the majority of respondents is 25 – 29 years old, specifically occupies 54% in the sample, followed by 27% aged 20 – 24 years, and respectively 15% and 4% age groups 30 – 34 and 35 – 39 years.

Table 2. Relationship between age indicator and daily expenses

Daily expenses by age	%
20 - 50 euro	49.00%
25-29	28.00%
20 – 24	15.00%
30-34	5.00%
35 – 39	1.00%
less than 20 euro	34.00%
25-29	17.00%
30-34	7.00%
20 – 24	7.00%
35 – 39	3.00%
50 - 100 euro	14.00%
25-29	9.00%
20 – 24	3.00%
30-34	2.00%
over 100 euro	3.00%
20 – 24	2.00%
30-34	1.00%

Source: Study results

From the analysis of the data, it is concluded that most of the participating women, belonging to the age of 25 – 29 years, have evaluated with 8 points the infrastructure in tourism, against the majority of men, of the same age group, with the evaluation of 6 points. This assessment can be explained by the improvement of conditions in recent years in accommodation and restaurants, where women are more inclined to assess the conditions for family accommodation and inclusion. The table below shows the relationship of the age indicator with daily expenses during tourist trips.

In the data table it is noticed that 49% of the respondents who have calculated their daily expenses 20 – 50 Euros, about 28% of them belong to the age of 25 – 29 years, and 15% of them to the age of 20 – 24 years. Meanwhile, in 34% of those who see themselves spending less than 20 Euros, 17% of them still belong to the age of 25 – 29. These data show a reservation in the conception of daily expenses, a reason that is justified by the young age of the respondents, when most are either in the first steps of career or in the beginning of starting a family, and channel the income into more inherent matters.

The following is a tabular relationship between gender, age and the respective assessment of Internet access. This data is the core of the analysis, to understand the distribution by age and gender, on the use of the Internet and its necessity.

Table 3. Relationship between age, gender and Internet access

Female (57%)		Male (43%)	
Normal	25.00%	Normal	16.00%
25-29	13.00%	25-29	8.00%
20 – 24	7.00%	20 – 24	4.00%
30-34	4.00%	35 – 39	2.00%
35 – 39	1.00%	30-34	2.00%
Very much	20.00%	Extremely much	13.00%
25-29	8.00%	25-29	8.00%
20 – 24	7.00%	20 – 24	3.00%
30-34	5.00%	35 – 39	1.00%
Extremely much	8.00%	30-34	1.00%
25-29	5.00%	Much	13.00%
20 – 24	2.00%	25-29	10.00%
30-34	1.00%	20 – 24	2.00%
Very little	2.00%	30-34	1.00%
20 – 24	2.00%	Very little	1.00%
None	2.00%	25-29	1.00%
30-34	1.00%		
25-29	1.00%		

Source: Study results

At first glance, it is noticed that both genders have a normal access to Internet during their travels. However, despite the positive trend of Internet use, men have higher ratings in this regard compared to women, where only 8% of them have extremely needed Internet access, while men 13%. This is also noticed by the fact that none of the men has given any significant assessment of Internet access. This logic, too, takes into account age, where most women between the ages of 25 – 29 are more likely to be family members than men in the same age group. Also, men in this age group often choose to travel independently, organizing their own trips, and as a result Internet access is an advantage for orientation towards the desired destination.

Conclusion

Improving the tourist experience, so that customer satisfaction gains the right level of operation is one of the challenges for the future in this sector. The long lack of quality investments in this field, as well as the lack of experience in hospitality according to the appropriate standards, has left behind in time the development of tourism in our country. Although there are still many foreigners who appreciate the originality and virginity of nature and the services provided, there is still work to be done in the field, in order to use all possible capacities from this opportunity. In economic terms, in addition to all the positive indices of recent years, unfortunately tourism was one of the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The shock to the very heart of the country's economic engine, and the prolonged isolation from the pandemic, turned tourism into regression, and as such there is a need for new alternative incentives. Already relying on local tourists, according to general field observations, tourism is resuming its vitalization, but certainly with small steps and mainly of a seasonal nature.

Regarding the integration of technology in the tourism sector, its impact has been extreme, and as such, has established new dimensions in the way of running tourism, as well as in the way of offering tourism products or services. E-commerce today, also called e-commerce, is one of the most used forms in the global market for the exchange of products or services, and as a result the tourism sector has not been left untouched by such a phenomenon. Today, most tourism products are promoted electronically, and various reservations or payments are made through technological applications. So, digital transformation is an inevitable phenomenon, and consequently has affected the resizing of the tourism sector.

In the analysis of the study, we can conclude that, no matter how important the impact of technology on the new conception of tourism, Albania and Albanians still lag relatively behind with access to this field. Albanians generally do not have much credibility in tourism applications or websites, especially in financial terms, and consequently remain traditional in the way of payments, reservations, accommodation or other forms of tourism chain.

Even in terms of spending, Albanians see themselves more towards traditional tourism, accommodation in private apartments and less in elite resorts. Of course, it should also be mentioned the fact that elite tourism, with tourist complexes or resorts, is a concept that is only developing in recent years.

Beyond urban areas, most of the rural ones are often characterized by a low health service, a reason that prevents some tourists from undertaking trips, especially family members. Given these conditions, many areas with great tourist potential, but which do not have the proper attention from state structures, remain unused and uninvested.

One of the main challenges is setting priorities in economic development, in the word in its full sense. So, governments cannot continue to consider tourism development as a random phenomenon, where the number of tourists is just a figure, but we need a proper strategy to turn tourism into an industry, where the calculation is not done in the end, but to be done according to a strategic planning and management. Despite the efforts of the last decade, there is still work to be done in practice.

For the implementation of the first recommendation, an urgent need is the cooperation of all administrative structures, at central and local level, to see tourism as one of the only opportunities to promote the development of the economic chain in the country. Apart from other sectors, tourism is one of those sectors that is related to many others, as even a simple working visit, without tourist purposes, can offer the opportunity to develop the local economy. In these circumstances, it is an important task to put an end to administrative disputes in the division of competencies. For this, a coordination of all legal and political work is needed, for the division of tasks, for the benefit of the development of the area.

Another valid recommendation can be public investment in road infrastructure, for the revitalization of many areas which lose their value from oblivion, due to lack of investment. The problem of roads is one of the biggest concerns that characterizes Albanian tourism over the years. Despite the efforts of governments to invest in infrastructure in the last decade, as a result of the conception of tourism as a random phenomenon, the investment has not been carried out properly, bypassing the problem of procrastination to the detriment of public goods. Even the economic model with PPP can be an effective solution, as long as the contractual relationship is not built at the expense of the public and in favor of the private.

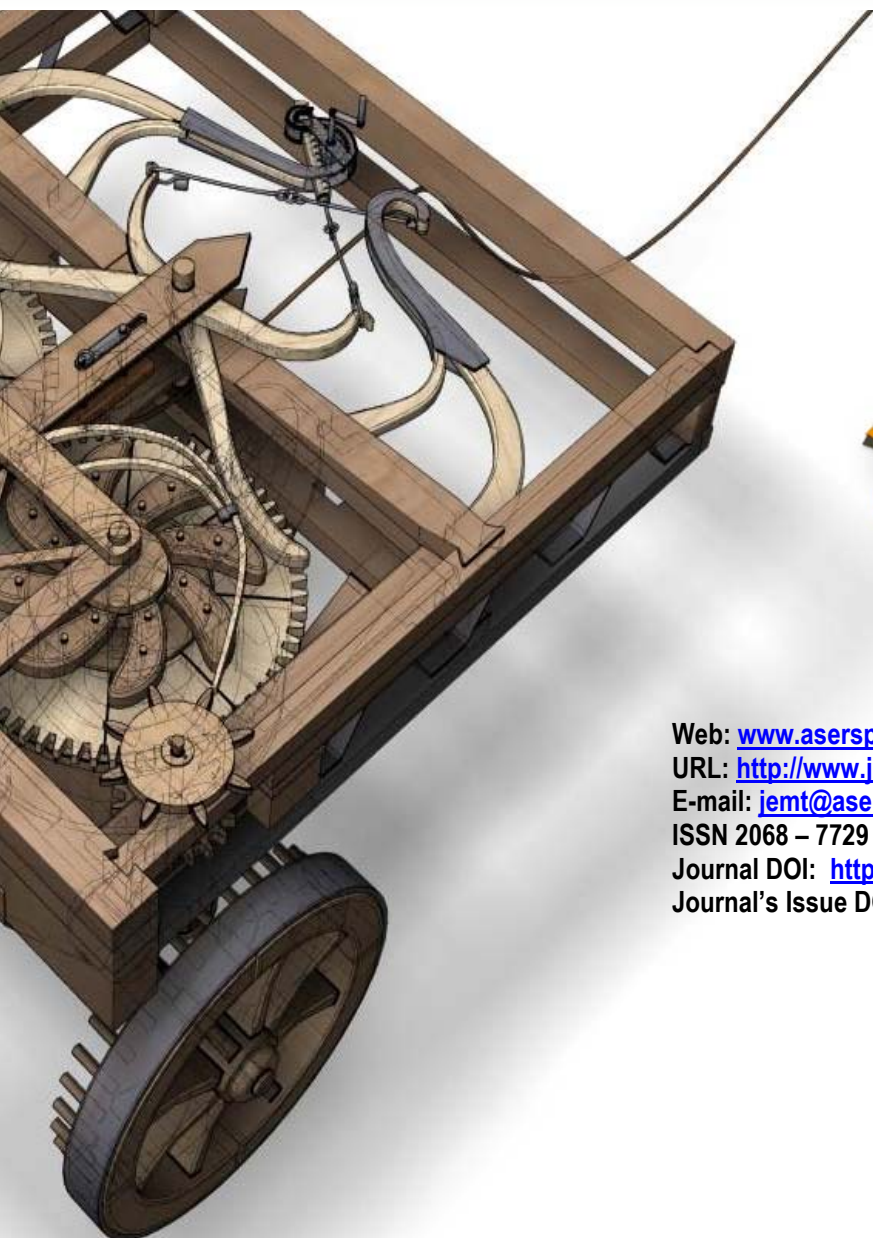
Last but not least, the use of smart components to transform key tourist areas into areas where Internet access and technological development are a key factor in promoting and developing the sector. Borrowing advanced models of big cities, with best practices for effective tourist management, can be a positive example to consider.

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