

SIGNIFICANCE AND POTENTIAL OF MOBILE APPLICATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY TOURISM: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF SERVICE PROVIDERS' AND TOURISTS' PERCEPTIONS IN THE CITY OF ZAGREB¹

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ABSTRACT

In an increasing number of destinations, technology, including mobile applications, sensors, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things (IoT), are being employed to deliver personalised, timely, and relevant information to visitors. Technology implementation improves the quality of stay, enables better destinations management and mitigate negative environmental impacts. Destinations seek to enhance interaction among the local community, visitors, and institutions through intelligent communication. The city of Zagreb, as the administrative, cultural and tourist center of Croatia, despite the growing number of tourists, is not fully aligned with the needs of modern users. The aim of the paper is to explore the current state, role and effectiveness of mobile applications in the tourism context of Zagreb through a theoretical and practical framework and to analyze opportunities for their improvement. By comparing with examples of good practice (for example, the city of Copenhagen), the paper seeks to identify relevant factors that contribute to the successful implementation of smart technologies. Primary research among tourists and service providers provides insight into user perceptions, the level of satisfaction with existing digital solutions and their needs and future expectations..

KEY WORDS: tourism, mobile applications, digital technology in tourism, the City of Zagreb

1. INTRODUCTION

In last few decades, travel patterns have changed to a large extent, from group travel to individual travel, and travellers need more information than ever before (Chung et al., 2015). Mobile applications can provide numerous relevant information. Furthermore, they are part of the experience provided to users during their stay in a tourism destination, but they are also useful in the originating region as consumers decide to book and purchase a trip. What mobile applications provide is a set of information about the destination, accommodation, activities and other tourist needs in one place.

In recent years, the City of Zagreb has been investing increasing efforts in the development of digital solutions within urban and public infrastructure, which is increasingly reflected in tourism. The introduction of digital platforms, mobile applications and online services has enabled better information for visitors and thus easier access to city facilities and services. However, there are still challenges associated with the maintenance, coordination and visibility of such tools in tourism. Many services are individual, and the consumer experience is not tailored to specific needs.

¹ This paper is based on the master thesis entitled "Istraživanje uloge i mogućnosti daljnjeg razvoja mobilnih aplikacija u turizmu grada Zagreba" [Research of the role and possibilities of further development of mobile applications in tourism of the city of Zagreb], written and publicly defended by Daniela Guja in September 2025 under the supervision of Associate Professor Danijela Ferjanić Hodak at the Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb.

The subject of the paper involves mobile applications in tourism with an emphasis on their role and functionality in tourism. The paper analyzes existing digital tools used to inform, guide and interact with tourists and examines their impact on the quality of the tourist experience. The paper also seeks to increase understanding of the importance of integrated products for improving the tourism supply and visitor satisfaction. For the purpose of the study, primary research was conducted on two groups of stakeholders in the city of Zagreb. The first group is stakeholders of the tourism offer, and the second is tourists. The main goal is to investigate and demonstrate the role and possibility of developing mobile applications intended for tourists and service providers in Zagreb.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Mobile applications are software programmes designed to run on portable devices such as smartphones, tablets, and smartwatches. They are developed to provide access to specific needs and services. Mobile applications are a key part of the digital ecosystem because they enable fast, accessible, and interactive communication between users and systems. The foundation of mobile applications includes the user interface (UI), application logic, database, and connectivity to network services.

Today, mobile applications offer a wide range of functions. From basic communication tools, through social networks and productivity tools, to specialized applications for health, education and tourism. Their flexibility and affordability enable end users to use advanced digital solutions almost anytime and anywhere. An additional element of mobile applications is the use of integrated device functions, such as GPS, camera, motion sensors, microphones and Bluetooth, which enable advanced functionality such as location-based services, beacon communication and mobile authentication. These technologies significantly expand the applicability of applications.

Also, the aspect of security is important because applications mostly contain sensitive data, therefore the implementation of encryption, authentication and security protocols is a necessary component of development (ISO/IEC 27001, 2020). Mobile applications are distributed through digital stores such as Google Play and Apple Store, with certain standards and rules for acceptance. Apart from allowing users to install and update easily, these platforms also provide ratings and reviews to see how popular the app is.

According to the operating system they use, there are three main types of mobile applications: native, which are developed specifically for a specific operating system (Android or iOS), web applications, which run in a mobile web browser and are not installed, and hybrid applications that combine elements of native and web applications (Dobrea & Diosan, 2019). Different programming languages and development tools are used to develop mobile applications, such as Swift for iOS and Java for Android, which allows development for multiple platforms from the same source code.

User experience (UX) design, which focuses on making applications as easily and efficiently usable as possible (Krug, 2021, p. 9), is a key element of application development. Applications often use push notifications as a means of direct and immediate user communication, which helps encourage user engagement and interactions. Using app usage analytics, developers can also keep track of user behaviour patterns over time and enhance functionality based on real-time feedback (Google Firebase, 2023). Recently, developers have also paid considerable attention to low-code and no-code development platforms that allow development quicker and make it easier for users without coding experience to build applications. This provides local communities, institutions and entrepreneurs the ability to create their own digital solutions (Bodicherla, 2025). Applications are usually designed using a "mobile-first" approach, meaning that the applications are first created for mobile devices and then adapted for laptops and computers later, in keeping with current practice. Mobile applications usually also take advantage of cloud computing infrastructure that allows for scalability, high availability, and synchronisation of data between devices. Finally, it is also necessary to mention some of the challenges faced by developers of mobile applications; to highlight those are a fragmented market, user expectation for speed and simplicity, and the constant need for security updates and legal compliance. Mobile applications are increasingly being enhanced with artificial intelligence and machine learning in the digital transformation sphere. This allows the development of intelligent applications which fit around the user in real time, making engagement more fluid and efficient. Another key factor of application development is interoperability, which is to say, the ability of an application to hook into, and communicate with, other systems, databases and platforms. This is especially important in the case of smart destinations, where multiple digital services need to be working together (e.g. transport, accommodation, cultural institutions). Developers also need to consider ethics, data privacy and digital inclusion, ensuring that applications are accessible to all users, including older age adults and those with disabilities. Sustaining mobile solutions development, therefore, means not only technical quality but also social responsibility.

2.1. The role of mobile applications in the tourism market

Mobile applications are one of the key elements of the contemporary travel experience, changing the way that travellers engage with a destination. Their role involves more than provision of information, as they create opportunities for personalization, interaction, and engagement within users. Travellers today expect digital assistance in every stage of the process from inspiration, to research, to booking and planning, to navigation, as well as sharing their impressions on social media (Armutcu et al., 2023). When tourists use mobile apps, they expect to make their trip easier, including information about accommodations, attractions, gastronomy, and events. Before the trip itself, apps help find flights, hotels, and activities, and offer price comparisons and reviews of services or products from other users. During the stay, apps enable easier orientation, contact with local service providers, and contactless payment, while after their return they are used to share experiences and feedback (Dias, 2021).

One of the most important characteristics of travel apps is personalization. Based on data about user behaviour, their location and interests, applications can recommend content that is tailored to each user (Gretzel et al., 2015, p. 184). Location-based services, recommendation systems and machine learning algorithms are used to provide relevant suggestions in real time.

Mobile applications in tourism are divided into travel planning and booking applications where users can book accommodation, transportation, excursions or some combination of the above. Some examples include Booking.com, Airbnb, Skyscanner and Expedia, as they integrate different services and enable fast and secure booking via mobile phone. Navigation applications help tourists to find their way around the area and explore the desired routes. The most famous example is Google Maps, but there are also destinations that offer their own applications with interactive maps, marked attractions and traffic information. Furthermore, interpretation applications with a lot of information that offer content about cultural and natural heritage, these would be museum or cultural route applications. Review and social sharing apps provide reading of other people's reviews and ratings of services, attractions and restaurants. Examples of such applications are TripAdvisor and Google Reviews, and they have an important impact on the reputation of tourist entities. Personalized applications are characterized by an interface that is programmed exclusively for a single destination or service provider. Such applications offer location-based and personalized recommendations based on the user's interests. They include chatbots, push notifications, user accounts and content recommendations. Examples of such applications are Visit Copenhagen, Ljubljana by Wheel, My Vienna and Hello Hong Kong. Local authorities and destination management organizations (DMOs) are increasingly developing their own applications to improve communication with visitors and provide centralized information. These applications are not only used as a source of information but also track visitor movements. The visitor data collected can be used to inform better destination planning and management. Thus, the applications serve as a tool for improving sustainable tourism development, as they facilitate re-distribution of visitors and relieve stress on overcrowded areas. The on-going use of mobile applications can also provide a positive impact on an area's economic sustainability. The smaller service provider can advertise and sell directly, reducing the reliance on intermediaries who can capture a large share of visitor revenue. Along with these gains are some real challenges. The fractured application market can confuse the user, and an excess of unintegrated applications can cloud the user experience (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2018). Data privacy and security are also serious concerns, including those related to geographic and personalized recommendations. Service providers have the obligation to navigate the regulations and ensure compliance with policy (e.g., the GDPR) while being transparent about the processing of personal data. Finally, the digital literacy of tourists will also affect the effectiveness of the applications (Hargittai, 2005, p. 371). Although it is often assumed that all modern tourists are digitally literate, in practice there are significant differences between users, especially with regard to generational, educational and cultural factors.

Younger generations, who have grown up with technology, generally have a high level of digital literacy and expect interactive, personalized and automated solutions during their stay. On the other hand, older generations, who have not grown up in a digital environment, may have a lower level of trust in technology and often prefer personal contact and printed materials (Nimrod, 2018, p. 1086).

In addition to tourists, mobile applications are extremely important for destinations and service providers due to the fact that they allow them to collect useful feedback through user reviews, ratings and comments. However, it is very important to understand the emotional state of tourists and how these feelings are expressed in user reviews (Çaylak et al., 2024). Through their own applications or third-party platforms, hotels, restaurants, museums, agencies and other service providers can not only advertise their products and services, but also manage reservations, offer special offers, send notifications and collect user data (Hamouda, 2022). With the help of analytics tools, it is possible to monitor attraction attendance, length of stay and visitor satisfaction in real time, which contributes to smart destination management. They also play a role in creating a "seamless" tourist experience, which includes a smooth transition between different stages of the trip (Neuhofer et al., 2014, p. 340). In addition, through push notifications, personalized recommendations and geolocation functions, applications become a powerful marketing tool that encourages spending and user loyalty (Gretzel et al., 2015, p. 183).

Furthermore, the integration of applications with social networks, such as Instagram, Facebook or TikTok, has direct marketing potential. Users often spontaneously share photos, videos, and travel experiences via social media, especially

when apps are designed to encourage this type of interaction. Such content has a high level of authenticity and trust among potential tourists because it comes from real users, rather than from official promotional channels.

It is also important to note that many apps also offer functionalities for people with disabilities, such as support for screen readers, audio descriptions, high-contrast displays, and information about accessibility of facilities. In this way, mobile technologies contribute to inclusiveness and greater social responsibility of the tourism industry (Darcy & Dickson, 2009, p. 32).

2.2. Analysis of selected examples of good practice of mobile applications in the tourism market

Successful mobile applications in tourism are characterized by wide availability, user adaptability, simple interface and integration of various functionalities that facilitate the user experience throughout the entire trip. Such applications enable planning, booking, navigation and sharing experiences, and their usefulness is also reflected in user feedback, a high number of downloads and positive reviews.

TripAdvisor is one of the most famous and influential global platforms for planning and sharing travel experiences. Launched in 2000, it has grown over time into a central place where millions of users can exchange reviews, recommendations and photos of accommodation, restaurants, attractions and activities in destinations around the world (TripAdvisor, 2024).

The main advantage of the application is its real-time review function; users can leave comments, ratings, photos and impressions immediately after visiting a particular location via their mobile devices. This enables essential two-way communication between tourists and service providers, which can significantly affect the reputation of businesses, but also the decision-making of future visitors (Xiang et al., 2017, p. 55). The application also automatically displays the best-rated content near the user using location-based services, which is especially useful during spontaneous visits to unfamiliar cities. Worldwide, the application has surpassed 100 million downloads and boasts a high average user rating of roughly 4/4.5, indicating its relevance and success (Google Play Store, 2024b).

Booking.com is one of the most significant global platforms for booking accommodation and additional tourist services and its mobile application is viewed as a significant part in the digital travel planning process. The mobile application currently has over 500 million downloads and an average user rating of 4.6/5 (Google Play Store, 2024a), establishing it as one of the most frequently used applications in the tourism system.

GetYourGuide is a global digital platform that specializes in the booking of attractions, tours and tourist activities and the mobile application is quickly becoming an important tool for tourists during the travel planning phase. The application is designed to allow users to quickly search and filter activities based on interests, location, language of guide, duration, and price. Of particular importance is the ability to purchase tickets without waiting in line, which increases efficiency and user satisfaction, especially in popular destinations (GetYourGuide, 2024).

The Valamar mobile application is an excellent example of the integration of digital technology into hotel and destination management in Croatia. Developed by the largest domestic tourism group, Valamar Riviera, the application is aimed at increasing the quality of guests' stay through digital personalization of services, automation of information and facilitated communication between guests and hotel staff (Valamar, 2023). The application also has a mobile payment service and integration with the Valamar Plus Club loyalty program, which encourages users to interact more frequently and long-term commitment to the brand.

The Brijuni Pocket Guide mobile application, developed for the Brijuni National Park, is an example of how technology can be effectively used to interpret natural and cultural heritage, without disrupting the sensitive space of the destination. The application functions as a multimedia guide intended for visitors who want to explore the islands independently, while providing a rich and educational experience (NP Brijuni, 2023).

As part of the digital transformation of tourism, Copenhagen stands out as an example of good practice in the development of mobile applications that connect technology, user experience and sustainable development. The Copenhagen App was created to meet the growing demands for digital and personalized information from modern-day travellers. Initially launched in 2017, it has become a prominent reference to aid tourists with their planning for being in the city. During the last few years, the app has been downloaded over 150,000 times, demonstrating strong acceptance from both domestic and international travellers. The high retention rate signifies that the app has value for users, receiving daily engagement, as rather than being used only once, users mention on multiple occasions that they referred to the app during their stay. User ratings indicate an average of 4.5 to 5 stars. Consumers most frequently praise the ease of use, valid information, and convenience of use without needing to operate on Wi-Fi (App Store, 2024). Over the years, the app has been developed in cooperation with many local businesses (cultural institutions, caterers, and other city authorities). The app operates beyond strictly user-friendly criteria; it has also become a well-structured means to support lesser-known areas of the city.

It provides interactive maps, audio information about attractions, recommendations for restaurants, neighbourhood-based guides, and suggestions for daily outings in the city (VisitDenmark, 2022). An added benefit of the app is the option of offline functionality by pre-downloading content. Beside the essential functions, the app also offers possibility to connected to social networks so users can share their experiences in real-time for further visibility of the destination. Opportunities for personalization, like the "My Copenhagen" profile, give you the ability to save your favourites and follow your interests. Built-in reminders and notifications alert you to important events or changes.

Mobile applications like The Copenhagen App have an increasingly significant influence on the shaping of tourist behaviour, but also on the way tourists experience and interpret the destination. Technologically advanced solutions enable a personalized experience, increased interaction with the destination, and greater flexibility in planning and implementing activities (Li et al., 2022).

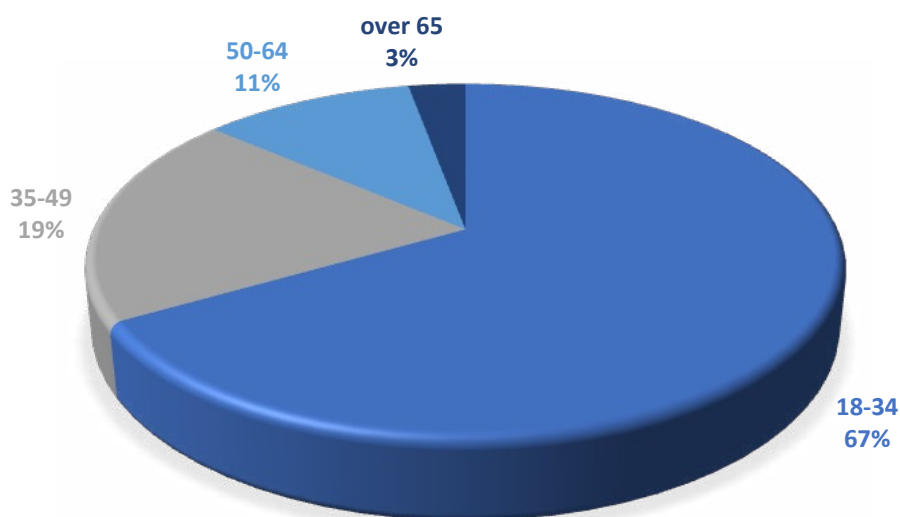
Personalized recommendations and algorithmic support within the application contribute to more diverse tourist behaviour, thus promoting lesser-known locations as well. Thus, the application becomes a tool not only for information, but also for strategic management of tourist flows.

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH RESULTS

After the exponential increase in the number of digitalized services, there is a need in the city of Zagreb to investigate the role and possibilities of developing mobile applications within the tourism offer. The subject of this research is to examine the attitudes of tourism supply and demand stakeholders on the use of mobile applications. This research aims to analyze how digitally active tourists are and how much other entities in tourism use mobile applications to improve their offer. The primary research used the online survey form Google Forms, and the research was conducted in Zagreb during July and August 2025. The survey was distributed to tourism service providers in Zagreb, including hotels, travel agencies, museums, restaurants and other relevant entities. In addition, the survey questionnaire for tourists was distributed via online platforms and social networks and at high-frequency locations in the center of Zagreb. 102 valid questionnaires on the demand side and 27 valid questionnaires on the tourism supply side were collected.

Of the 102 respondents, 75% come from Croatia, while the remaining 25% come from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the USA, England, Spain, Serbia, Turkey, Australia, Denmark, Greece, Italy and Canada. The age structure of the respondents is shown in the Graph 1.

Graph 1. Age structure of respondents



Source: primary research

The majority of respondents are under 35 years old, which is why it is expected that they are more inclined to use technology, specifically mobile applications.

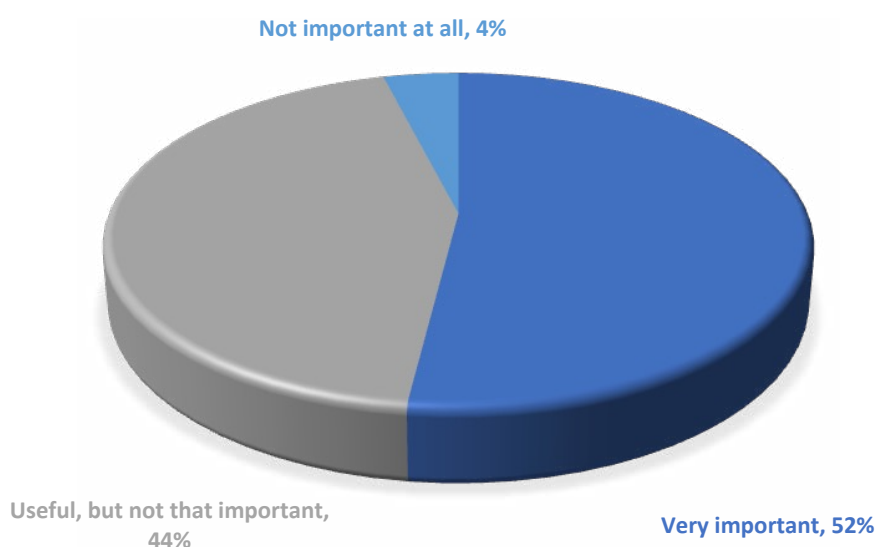
When it comes to the number of tourist trips on an annual basis, more than half of respondents (52.9 %) travel 2-3 times a year, slightly less than 30 respondents (28.4 %) travel once a year, almost 15 % of respondents travel between 4 and 6

times a year, while the smallest number of respondents (4 %) go on more than 6 trips a year. The most common travel motives include vacation and recreation, active tourism and culture.

Furthermore, more than 70 % of respondents often use mobile applications before, during and after travel, 20 % of them use applications occasionally, while only 7 % of respondents use applications rarely. Only 3 % of respondents do not use applications on their trips at all. Application users most often use them to find information about restaurants, attractions and transportation, as well as for navigation and translation.

More than 90% of respondents believe it is important to have a single application containing all local information, while a small proportion think it is not a problem to search for information in several places. Graph 2 shows the importance of tourist reviews and recommendations in the application.

Graph 2. The importance of tourist reviews and recommendations in the application



Source: primary research

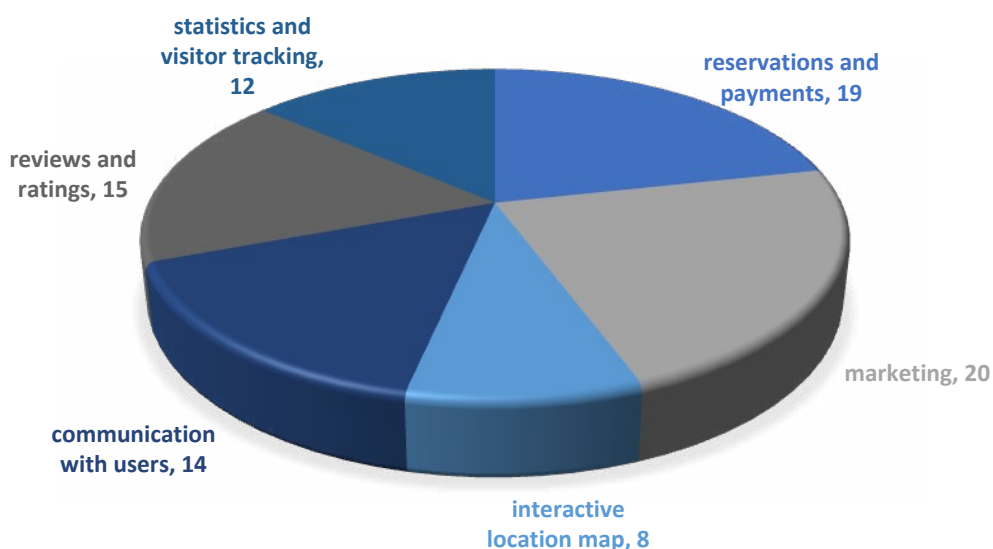
When it comes to the motivation for downloading the application, the main motive for downloading the application is reliability of information (44.1 %), followed by ease of use (26.5 %), recommendations and reviews (19.6 %) and discounts within the application (9.8 %).

Respondents highlight the interactive map with attractions, residents' recommendations, the ability to make reservations, and discounts and special offers as the most useful features of the unique application. When asked about the aspects that bother them most when using applications, respondents mention advertisements, a complicated interface, irrelevant information, and issues with phone memory caused by having many applications.

The last question related to demand related to the opinion about reduced contact with employees due to more intensive use of applications. The majority of respondents (70 %) have no problem with reduced contact, almost 20 % of respondents prefer personal contact, while 10 % of respondents answer that they are not sure.

The questionnaire, which included entities on the side of the tourist offer, included accommodation service providers, restaurants, tourist guides, tourist intermediaries, museums and equipment renters. The majority of respondents (51.9 %) are employed in companies with fewer than 10 employees, 25.9 % of respondents come from companies with between 11 and 50 employees, while the remaining 22.2 % of respondents work in companies employing between 51 and 150 people. Of the total number of respondents, 22.2 % do not have their own website, while the majority of respondents have their own website. Almost 60 % of respondents use mobile applications (their own or others') in their business. Furthermore, the majority of respondents (85 %) believe that part of their business could be digitized using an application, in accordance with the requirements and capabilities of the users.

Also, as many as 70 % of respondents believe that a unique mobile application related to the destination could help local service providers in promoting and marketing products and services. Graph 3 shows the functionalities of applications that respondents consider useful for their business.

Graph 3. Functionalities of applications that respondents consider useful for their business

Source: primary research

Most respondents would use all functionalities, while a smaller portion would use the interactive map in the application related to their business. Furthermore, almost 70 % of respondents would be willing to include their offer in a single application, while 25 % of respondents are not sure, or inclusion would depend on the conditions. More than half of the respondents would only be involved passively, while a smaller portion of respondents (22.2 %) is willing to participate in the development of the application as a partner. When asked about their willingness to invest financial resources in their own application, almost half of the respondents are willing to invest up to 2,000 euros, 5 respondents are willing to invest between 2,000 and 10,000 euros, while 11 respondents do not plan to invest in their own application. If there were a single application at the destination level, 60 % of respondents would be willing to allocate up to 10 euros per month for participation, 30 % of respondents would allocate between 11 and 50 euros, while only 10 % of respondents are willing to allocate between 51 and 500 euros on a monthly basis. The main challenges related to the development and use of a single application are cited by service providers as finances, timely data updates and the possibility of its use by the vast majority of tourists.

The second questionnaire referred to tourists who were on holiday in Zagreb during the period when the questionnaire was distributed. At the very beginning, respondents gave an assessment of how digitally active their clients are. More than 70 % of respondents believe that their clients are moderately digitally active, while almost 30 % of respondents believe that their clients are very digitally active.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The conducted research provides insight into the perception and willingness to use a single tourism application by users on the one hand and service providers on the other. Both groups of respondents are inclined to use such a single application and believe that it brings multiple advantages to the destination. On the other hand, financial costs, time required for implementation and ease of use are the main challenges that need to be considered when introducing a single application. Furthermore, the research showed a growing level of digital maturity among users, as well as openness towards further development of technological solutions in tourism. Mobile apps are widely adopted by people while travelling, while many service providers see a need to introduce apps into their businesses, but face challenges related to technical expertise or financial resources. The City of Copenhagen app case study is an example of how the intentional use of digital tools supported by solid institutional support can create multiple benefits for tourists, local stakeholders, and the broader community. This approach demonstrates that the digital transformation of tourism at cities and destinations is no longer an optional enhancement to the tourist offer, but a necessary advancement towards efficient and sustainable destination management.

The research findings lead to great justification for developing a local mobile application for Zagreb to tie together several facets of the tourist offer (such as cultural facilities, restaurants, transport, hotels and personalised recommendations), offer improved tourist user experience, contribute to a more streamlined efforts of the local stakeholders, and position Zagreb better in the global marketplace.

Main limitation is attributable to the small sample size. With a larger sample, the results would have been generalised to the larger population. To develop on the research, it is suggested to have a larger and more diverse group of respondents

and have a wider range of service providers in future research. In addition, using other forms of both quantitative and qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to understand the needs and attitudes of mobile application users may further develop understanding. In conclusion, while there are some limitations found in this research, the findings can provide a foundation for future development of digital solutions in tourism to improve the tourism offer of the City of Zagreb through a unique local application or the like.

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ZNAČAJ I POTENCIJAL MOBILNIH APLIKACIJA U SUVREMENOM TURIZMU: EMPIRIJSKA STUDIJA PERCEPCIJE PRUŽATELJA USLUGA I TURISTA U GRADU ZAGREBU

SAŽETAK

Destinacije sve više koriste digitalne alate poput mobilnih aplikacija, senzora, umjetne inteligencije i interneta stvari (IoT) za pružanje personaliziranih, pravovremenih i relevantnih informacija posjetiteljima. Cilj je povećati kvalitetu boravka, optimizirati resurse i smanjiti negativne utjecaje na okoliš. Takve destinacije također potiču interakciju između lokalne zajednice, posjetitelja i institucija kroz pametnu komunikaciju. Grad Zagreb, kao administrativno, kulturno i turističko središte Hrvatske, unatoč rastućem broju turista, nije u potpunosti usklađen s potrebama suvremenih korisnika. Cilj rada je kroz teorijski i praktični okvir istražiti postojeće stanje, ulogu i učinkovitost mobilnih aplikacija u turizmu grada Zagreba te analizirati mogućnosti za njihovo unaprjeđenje. Usporedbom s primjerima dobre prakse (primjer grada Kopenhagena), rad nastoji identificirati relevantne faktore koji doprinose uspješnoj implementaciji pametnih tehnologija. Primarno istraživanje među turistima i pružateljima usluga pruža uvid u percepciju korisnika, razinu zadovoljstva postojećim digitalnim rješenjima te njihove potrebe i očekivanja u budućnosti.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: turizam, mobilne aplikacije, digitalna tehnologija u turizmu, grad Zagreb