

E-Tourism as a Catalyst for Rural Destination Promotion: Digital Pathways for Sustainable Tourism Development in Belsh, Albania

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital technologies is transforming how rural destinations are discovered, experienced, and promoted. This study investigates the role of e-Tourism in enhancing the visibility and sustainable development of the Municipality of Belsh, a rural administrative unit in central Albania known for its unique lake landscapes and agritourism potential. Through fieldwork with local tourism actors, digital content analysis, and community interviews, the research identifies current digital practices, gaps in online presence, and opportunities for innovation in tourism promotion. Findings reveal that although Belsh has natural and cultural assets with high tourism potential, its digital footprint remains limited and fragmented. Local businesses and institutions often lack the resources and skills to fully utilize digital platforms such as social media, geolocation services, and tourism websites. Nevertheless, emerging grassroots initiatives, including online lake trails, agritourism centers, and individualized digital promotion, eco-tourism storytelling, and amateur digital promotion, highlight growing awareness of the importance of e-Tourism in attracting both domestic and international visitors. The study argues that strategic investments in digital infrastructure, training, and collaboration between local authorities and tourism entrepreneurs can position Belsh as a model for smart rural tourism and a reference point for sustainable tourism development. It concludes with recommendations for developing an integrated digital tourism strategy that leverages local identity, enhances the visitor experience, and fosters sustainable rural development and promotes sustainable rural tourism.

Keywords: e-Tourism; rural development; digital transformation; sustainable tourism; digital literacy; Belsh; Albania

JEL classification: L81, L83, Z32

Paper type: Research article

Received: 24 June 2025

Accepted: 15 July 2025

DOI: 10.54820/entrenova-2025-0060

Citation: Sallja, E., Çaro (Kola), E., Hasrama, O., & Axhemi, S. (2025). E-Tourism as a Catalyst for Rural Destination Promotion: Digital Pathways for Sustainable Tourism Development in Belsh, Albania. *ENTRENOVA - ENTERprise REsearch InNOVation*, 11(1), <https://doi.org/10.54820/entrenova-2025-0060>.

Introduction

The rapid technological advancements and the significant intensity of digital developments observable across every economic sector inevitably exert a profound influence on tourism as well. As a consequence of these digital transformations, the tourism industry is increasingly confronted with the concept of e-Tourism. This concept concerns the utilization of digital technologies across all aspects of tourism management, promotion, and experience. Such a modern form of tourism interaction presents a critical opportunity for rural areas, which often face infrastructure deficits, limited promotional capacity, and insufficient economic opportunities. Today, it is inconceivable to discuss tourism without addressing the concept of "e-tourism." Enterprises in the tourism sector are compelled to adapt to ongoing developments to meet consumer demands; they must innovate by creating new services (Ait Soudane, 2019). The travel industry is undergoing a significant transformation as customers increasingly use digital platforms for researching, booking, and managing travel itineraries (Badouch, M et al., 2025). On the other hand, especially in 2025, when Artificial Intelligence has reached its highest level of development, several trends have led to the integration of chatbots within the tourism industry. Tourists seek personalized travel recommendations tailored to their unique interests, preferences, and budgets. The tourism industry aims to enhance operational efficiency and reduce costs by having chatbots handle high volumes of queries, allowing human agents to focus on complex tasks (Badouch, M. et al., 2025). However, why is e-Tourism particularly important in the rural context?

The attractiveness potential of villages is determined by the number of tourist attractions, their value and fame, the degree of preservation and functionality of the attractive elements, and the availability of facilities for accommodation, food, and entertainment (Moisuc, D. et al., 2011). It should be emphasized that e-Tourism is an indispensable tool for the development of rural tourism in the "AI era," as it offers new opportunities for the practical, cost-efficient promotion, management, and dissemination of tourism-related information. Rural areas, which are often characterized by limited market access and scarce resources for traditional marketing, benefit significantly from the utilization of digital technologies such as websites, social media platforms, online booking systems, and mobile applications. One of the areas of application is online tourism platforms, booking systems, and platforms that enable the online review of products in scenic spots, and are already an important basis for tourism, not only in rural areas, but also in consumption decisions, which can facilitate tourists and even increase the average length of tourist stay. In addition, under the umbrella of ICT are included all network infrastructures that enable telecommunication in rural areas, support virtual communication, and improve access to services, farm management, and decision-making (Diareme, K, 2023). Tourism promotion in small geographic areas, such as in Belsh, plays a significant role in the region's economic and social progress. The importance of promoting tourism in small areas like Belsh lies in diversifying the local economy, expanding employment opportunities, and strengthening local identity, thereby contributing sustainably to the socio-economic development of the local population. Tourism in rural areas is a significant pillar of the economy, a means of boosting rural economies, promoting local products and SMEs, and ultimately improving the quality of life in rural areas (Diareme, K, 2023). The Municipality of Belsh is a destination endowed with extraordinary natural and cultural potential, located in the heart of Albania. Within this territory, a rich mosaic of 84 karstic lakes, fertile agricultural lands, rich biodiversity, and culturally significant regional values is blended. The karstic lakes of Belsh represent a unique ecological asset and are emerging as a growing destination for nature-based

tourism. Their value extends beyond aesthetic and recreational dimensions, encompassing essential ecological functions such as microclimate regulation, biodiversity support, and natural water filtration. The local population has historically built its livelihood upon these resources, shaping a traditional economy based on agriculture, livestock farming, artisanal production, and more recently, tourism. While agriculture continues to serve as the primary economic foundation, tourism is increasingly gaining ground as a developing sector, contributing to the improvement of local living standards and opening new pathways for sustainable development and economic diversification in the socio-geographic space of Dumre (Sallja. E et al, 2023).

Moreover, another key element closely tied to sustainable development is the promotion of ecotourism and the valorisation of local cultural heritage. Culture, traditions, and local identity constitute fundamental values that, when intelligently integrated with tourism and economic development, can generate synergies for sustainable development. In Belsh, notable progress has been made in creating tourism packages that offer authentic experiences, including nature excursions, lake-based activities, and participation in traditional cultural events (Sallja. E et al., 2025). On the other hand, although geographically limited in size, the Municipality of Belsh has considerable potential to advance agrotourism development further. By 2025, agrotourism in Belsh is emerging as a dynamically evolving sector with the capacity to contribute significantly to the economic and social development of the rural area. Capitalizing on its natural assets, such as Lake Seferan, several lakeside agrotourism facilities have been established, offering services including guesthouses, restaurants, canoeing, kayaking, and hiking. However, these offerings remain relatively unknown among both domestic and international tourists. To address this "information gap," targeted promotional activities must be undertaken, and tools provided by e-Tourism should be employed to support the economic development of such areas and facilitate their transformation into sustainable rural destinations. By integrating e-Tourism, Belsh can achieve a stronger positioning in the tourism market by targeting a specific group of visitors seeking authentic experiences, away from mass and overcrowded destinations. This is also the primary objective of the present study, which, through fieldwork, aims to examine the role of e-Tourism in promoting rural tourism, with a specific focus on the case of Belsh.

An analysis of tourism and digital infrastructure in Belsh reveals that by 2025 the infrastructure will be more developed and professional than in previous years. However, discussions still revolve around basic improvements, such as renovated roads, public promenades, water supply, and electricity. In terms of digital infrastructure, development predominantly occurs through private enterprises or non-profit organizations. For instance, in the Belsh area, FAO-supported projects in 2021 contributed to the digitalization of farms and agrotourism initiatives. Nevertheless, to strengthen sustainable tourism development in Belsh, local decision-makers must design an integrated strategy that includes investments in infrastructure, support for local enterprises, enhanced digital presence, and international promotion. Training local entrepreneurs, creating efficient digital platforms, and building partnerships with public and private stakeholders are essential steps toward fully harnessing Belsh's potential as a sustainable and competitive rural tourism destination.

Literature review and context of the study

E-tourism, using digital tools and the internet, offers significant potential to enhance tourism and support economic growth in rural regions. It involves leveraging online platforms for promotion, communication with visitors, and operational management, as well as implementing innovative tourism strategies tailored to rural contexts. The efficiency of the internet has increased through the multiplication of infomediaries,

which offer easier access to information, and the creation of shopbots (shopping robots) that compare prices or select sites based on different choice criteria (Longhi, C., 2008). The impact of the internet on the tourism industry has revolutionized the sectoral system of production and innovation. The knowledge bases on which the changes have been made are essential, as they affect the evolution of the system's boundaries. However, the technologies as such are not the engine of the system's reconfiguration (Longhi, C., 2008). E-tourism is the application of the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and e-commerce in the tourism industry (Wiranti, Y et al, 2024). The word "e-tourism" and its derivative, "m-tourism", reflect, among other things, a reality of societal consumption: the switch from desktop computers to mobile devices. Apart from a simple change of object, this transformation involves how the consumer approaches the territory, tourism practices, and how content generators, territories, and entrepreneurs must design their offers and structure their organizations in real time. In addition to the immediacy of digital devices, statistical data, traffic flows, visits, and access to territories are supposed to be analysable and quantifiable with granular precision (Espinel, C., 2021). When we use a smartphone as we move about, we see our surroundings differently, adopting new practices that combine physical exploration of place with digital navigation on the Web (Calvignac, C. et al., 2021). The smartphone offers new usage opportunities and, in doing so, hosts new commercial "capture devices" (Cardon, V, 2015). Innovation and development in the tourism industry can begin by examining the needs and problems in a region's tourism activities (Putera, W et al., 2025). Tourism can be considered a sectoral system because it involves numerous actors, directly or indirectly, interrelated by a complex set of market and non-market relations (Leiper, N. 1979).

In rural areas, where traditional marketing opportunities are often lacking and physical infrastructure is more limited, e-Tourism offers new avenues to enhance visibility and attract visitors through online platforms (UNWTO, 2001). Mobile applications, social media networks, booking platforms, and user-generated content represent essential tools that facilitate access to information and promote unique tourist experiences in remote or lesser-known areas (Buhalis, 2003). In an increasingly digitalized world, destinations that fail to embrace technology tend to fall behind. For rural areas, where challenges are numerous, integration into digital networks is not merely an alternative but a necessity. E-Tourism enables rural communities to build a distinct tourism identity, engage directly with potential visitors, and develop sustainable tourism models grounded in low-cost, high-impact technologies (Porter, 2001). This approach also contributes to the preservation of local authenticity by promoting both cultural and natural heritage. The reorganization of business processes driven by information and communication technologies, as observed in the evolving features of tourism development, is gradually generating a continuous transformation. This shift is reshaping the entire tourism industry, creating a range of opportunities and risks for all stakeholders. Information and communication technologies not only empower consumers to identify, personalize, and purchase tourism products but also support tourism development by providing practical tools for suppliers to design, manage, and distribute their offerings on a global scale (Buhalis et al., 2008).

Specifically, the Municipality of Belsh is characterized by a distinctive hilly-lacustrine landscape and a rich, diverse rural heritage (Sala et al., 2006). Promoting these values is essential for attracting visitors, generating local income, and preserving indigenous traditions. Small areas such as Belsh lack the capacity to implement large-scale marketing models, necessitating alternative, intelligent forms of promotion. Through e-Tourism, the Municipality of Belsh can offer accessible environments and low-cost itineraries tailored to the nature and profile of the tourist. The use of social media, the

creation of dedicated tourism websites, and the active involvement of the community in content production are among the most effective strategies to position Belsh at the forefront of both domestic and international visitor attention.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the intersection between e-Tourism and rural territorial development in the Municipality of Belsh. The methodological framework is developed to ensure depth of insight, contextual sensitivity, and analytical robustness, enabling a multidimensional exploration of how e-Tourism practices are perceived, adopted, and experienced in a rural setting. The research process is structured into three interrelated components: (1) desk-based analysis, (2) empirical fieldwork, and (3) data analysis and interpretation. The desk-based component involves collecting secondary sources, including academic literature and policy documents. Data collection employed two complementary qualitative and quantitative instruments targeting two key stakeholder groups: *local businesses* engaged in the tourism value chain and *municipal decision-makers responsible* for tourism development.

A structured questionnaire comprising 7 (seven) questions was administered to 20 (twenty) local business entrepreneurs, with multiple-choice and scaled responses. Simultaneously, structured interviews were conducted with 5 (five) representatives from the local governance and institutional sector, including the Mayor of Belsh, the Director of Tourism, and technical specialists in the fields of culture and tourism. The interviews, structured around five open-ended questions, aimed to elicit insights into policy orientation, institutional capacity, and strategic visions for integrating e-Tourism into local development agendas. This dual-pronged approach enables a holistic interpretation of both bottom-up entrepreneurial experiences and top-down governance dynamics, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the digital transformation landscape in Belsh's tourism sector. These instruments are designed to assess the level of digital integration, tourist behaviour and preferences, perceptions of destination quality, and the broader socio-economic impact of tourism activity.

Results

Within the framework of rural and sustainable tourism development in the Municipality of Belsh, the use of digital technologies and online platforms emerges as a crucial tool and catalyst for promoting tourist destinations. As part of the empirical component of this study, fieldwork was conducted in the Municipality of Belsh to assess the perceptions, digital practices, and strategic challenges related to e-Tourism in a rural context. The questionnaire results provide a detailed overview of online platform usage, the frequency of promotional activities, motivations for using social media, their impact on increasing visitor numbers, and the technological and institutional challenges faced by local businesses. Additionally, the questionnaire highlights the need for an integrated digital platform and institutional support to advance digital tourism promotion in the area.

The profile of the respondents

The respondent profile included a diverse range of actors representing a range of sectors, including hospitality (guesthouses and hotels), gastronomy (restaurants), tourism services (photography, bicycle rentals), retail (souvenirs and artisan crafts), and small-scale trade. These businesses have been operating for an average of 9 years, indicating a stable and experienced presence in the local tourism economy.

On the other hand, the combination of several interviews with representatives of local governance provides insights into strategic planning, tourism governance, and the role of digital tools in promoting rural destinations. This combined profile ensures a balanced perspective between operational experience on the ground and policy-level oversight.

Distribution of online platform usage

The data from the questionnaire conducted with local tourism entrepreneurs in the Municipality of Belsh indicate limited and concentrated use of digital platforms for promotional purposes (Table 1).

Table 1

Online platforms are employed for promotion

Platforms	Percentage (%)
Facebook	20 %
Instagram	60 %
Google Maps	-
Booking.com	10 %
TripAdvisor	-
Website Personal	10 %
No online platforms are utilized.	-

Source: Authors' work

Instagram emerges as the most widely used platform, accounting for 60% of responses, reflecting the importance of visual content in shaping the image of the tourist destination and attracting visitors, particularly among younger demographics. Conversely, Facebook is utilized in only 20% of cases, while Booking.com and personal websites register minimal use (10%), indicating a lack of technical capacity to manage more structured and professional digital marketing platforms. The complete absence of reports on the use of Google Maps and TripAdvisor signals a disconnection between entrepreneurs and crucial tools for interaction and orientation for both domestic and international tourists. These platforms serve not only as sources of information but also as mechanisms for building online reputation, managing reviews, and improving services based on visitor feedback. In this context, the data analysis reveals that the involvement of local actors in digital spaces remains at an early stage, driven more by intuitive use of social networks than by an organized and coordinated strategy. This situation poses a challenge to the sustainable development of tourism in the Municipality of Belsh, yet simultaneously presents an opportunity to build a new model of digital destination management. Such a model should integrate major international platforms, enhance local capacities, and coordinate institutional and private sector efforts. Only through a conscious approach, supported by professional training and partnerships among local stakeholders, can the full potential of e-Tourism be realized, ensuring proper representation of Belsh as a sustainable and competitive rural tourism destination in the marketplace.

Frequency of online content posting

Data on the frequency of social media posting provides deeper insight into the dynamics of platform use by local tourism entrepreneurs in the Municipality of Belsh, with a specific focus on their posting frequency (Table 2).

Table 2

The frequency of your social media posting activity per week

Frequency	Percentage (%)
Once a week or less frequently	48 %
Between two and three times	31 %
Four times or more frequently	21 %
No posting activity at all	-

Source: Authors' work

The results indicate that 48% of local tourism entrepreneurs post only once a week or less frequently, while 31% post between two and three times per week. Only 21% report a regular, more frequent activity of 4 or more posts. This distribution clearly demonstrates that, despite an initial presence on social networks, usage is neither consistent nor systematic and is not sustained by a sustained rhythm of digital communication. This situation reflects the absence of a structured online marketing strategy, where regular posting would serve to maintain audience engagement and sustain interest in tourist destinations. The high percentage of infrequent postings (48%) suggests that the majority of entrepreneurs view social media more as an occasional channel than as an essential instrument for tourism promotion. Such fragmented digital behaviour directly affects both the internal and external image of tourist destinations, rendering them less visible on online platforms and less competitive compared to destinations that employ more sophisticated digital content management strategies.

From a developmental perspective, the data presented in this table underscore the importance of building entrepreneurs' digital capacities, not only in establishing social media profiles but, more importantly, in the sustainable, structured management of content. Posting frequency is a key component in constructing an active and credible digital identity, particularly in rural areas where competition is based not only on product quality but also on how it is communicated and perceived by the audience. In this context, improving posting activity should be an integral part of a comprehensive strategy to strengthen e-Tourism in the Municipality of Belsh, where local institutions, tourism associations, and private actors collaborate to establish an inclusive digital marketing model.

Main reasons for using social media

Table 3 presents data that provide a clear overview of the primary reasons for tourism entrepreneurs' use of social media in the Municipality of Belsh.

Table 3

Primary reasons for social media use

Statement	Percentage (%)
To advertise my services	47 %
To attract new visitors	53 %
To inform current clients	
For personal use, not for business	
I do not use social media.	

Source: Authors' work

According to the questionnaire results, 53% of respondents use social media primarily to attract new visitors, while 47% use these platforms to advertise their services. These data indicate that entrepreneurs possess a particular awareness of the potential of social networks as important tools for audience expansion and direct

promotion of their activities. This orientation reflects a more practical understanding of the role of digital marketing in rural tourism, though still at a basic level and primarily driven by necessity rather than a structured strategy. The absence of responses regarding other options in the questionnaire, such as informing existing clients, personal use, or non-participation in social networks, raises several intriguing questions concerning how entrepreneurs conceptualize the functions of digital communication. Also, these results show that entrepreneurs are not committed to retaining existing clients but are always trying to "reach" new ones. The fact that none of the respondents identified informing existing clients as a primary objective reveals a one-dimensional approach to social media, treating it merely as an advertising tool rather than as a space for building sustained relationships with visitors or fostering a sustainable online community. In this context, the above data indicate limited functional use of social networks, predominantly focused on promotional activities, without fully exploiting their potential for communication, interaction, and customer relationship management. This situation mirrors the nascent stage of digital marketing development in rural tourism within the Municipality of Belsh, where social media is primarily perceived as an advertising instrument rather than as a dynamic platform for image management and marketing development. To overcome this simplified usage pattern, targeted interventions are needed to train entrepreneurs in Belsh, informing them about the benefits and dynamic opportunities that e-Tourism offers for the digital promotion of rural tourism destinations.

Perceived impact of social media on business visibility

The data demonstrate a clear and consistent perception among local tourism entrepreneurs that using online platforms increases visitor numbers (Table 4).

Table 4

Impact of online platform usage on visitor growth

Statement	Percentage (%)
Yes	94 %
No	6 %
Not sure / Not measured	

Source: Authors' work

According to Table 4, 94% of respondents affirmed that their presence on social networks and digital platforms has contributed to increased visitor flows, while only 6% reported otherwise. This finding is significant because it confirms that, despite the still-limited technical and managerial use of online platforms, their tangible effects on tourism performance are substantial. It highlights considerable potential for expansion and improvement, as local entrepreneurs now recognize the strategic role technology plays in enhancing visibility, attracting clientele, and increasing tourism revenue. Awareness of the positive impact of social media on visitor growth provides a solid foundation for the further development of digital marketing in rural destinations such as Belsh.

In the context of a tourism market increasingly dependent on platforms such as Instagram, Google, Facebook, and Booking.com, this positive perception indicates a readiness to invest in digital tools, particularly if institutional support or capacity-building interventions are provided. This finding is also significant for local tourism development policies, as it suggests that efforts to strengthen the digital presence of local actors will be well received and hold significant potential for economic and social benefits. Accordingly, the data not only confirm the effectiveness of online

platforms in stimulating visitor growth in Belsh but also underscore the importance of integrating these tools into the official strategy for sustainable tourism development. This overwhelmingly positive perception underscores the value of a digital presence in raising awareness and attracting potential clients in the tourism sector. It also suggests a growing recognition of social media as a key component in business strategy. With such a high level of awareness of the effects of online platforms, a favorable environment is created for strategic interventions to build a sustainable and competitive digital identity for the rural tourism destinations of the Municipality of Belsh. In this way, it becomes possible to transition from sporadic, informal technology use to the sustainable, professional management of the online presence, ultimately fostering the sustainable growth of rural tourism.

Main challenges faced by businesses in using online platforms

The data highlight the challenges of digitalization in rural tourism within the Municipality of Belsh, identifying the primary obstacles local entrepreneurs face in their efforts to promote online (Table 5).

Table 5

Challenges faced by businesses in digital promotion activities

Statement	Percentage (%)
Lack of technological training	42 %
Lack of time for online management	31 %
Lack of a stable internet connection	-
Lack of financial resources	20 %
Do not consider it necessary	7 %

Source: Authors' work

More than any other factor, the lack of technological training is cited as the primary challenge by 42% of respondents, clearly indicating that, for many, technology is not only an insufficient resource but also a domain in which fundamental competencies are lacking. This indicator underscores a deficiency in digital education investments. It helps explain other aspects of the analysis, such as sporadic platform use, infrequent posting, and ineffective social network management. Other factors, including a lack of time to manage online presence (31%) and limited financial resources (20%), reveal a challenging environment in which local entrepreneurs operate. These data suggest that the majority of businesses are family-oriented, with limited human and temporal capacity, and that the daily management of tourism activities often leaves little room for strategic digital planning. Financial constraints also preclude hiring external specialists, developing professional websites, or investing in targeted advertising.

While only 7% of respondents indicated that they do not consider a digital presence necessary, this relatively low figure is significant, as it suggests a growing consensus on the importance of online marketing in tourism. This finding reinforces the results of Table 4, where 94% of actors acknowledged that digital platforms have contributed to increased visitor numbers. In this context, the challenges reported above are not related to a lack of willingness or awareness, but rather to deficiencies in capacity, time, and resources, which can be addressed through well-structured interventions. These challenges also represent a clear call to local public authorities to actively involve entrepreneurs in digital development, integrating them as a core part of sustainable tourism development policies in the Municipality of Belsh. Suppose this support is provided sustainably and in a coordinated manner. In that case, the aforementioned challenges can be transformed into starting points for building a

functional e-Tourism system in Belsh, where technology ceases to be a privilege and becomes an integral part of every entrepreneur's daily operations.

Interest in a joint digital platform for tourism in Belsh

The questionnaire results, as reflected in Table 6, demonstrate a strong, unanimous interest among local tourism entrepreneurs in establishing a shared digital platform to promote tourism in the Municipality of Belsh.

Table 6

Evaluation of interest in a joint digital platform for tourism in Belsh

Statement	Percentage (%)
Yes	100 %
No	
Maybe	-

Source: Authors' work

This percentage (100%) conveys a clear message regarding the need for institutional collaboration and coordination in a sector where individual efforts have thus far been fragmented and dispersed. Such a platform would enable improved visibility of tourist destinations, the consolidation of tourism offers, and the creation of a unified image that harmoniously and professionally promotes the natural and cultural assets of the Municipality of Belsh. An overwhelming 100% of respondents expressed interest in creating a joint digital platform for tourism in Belsh, indicating unanimous support for collaborative online promotion. The lack of "No" or "Maybe" responses underscores a strong collective awareness of the potential benefits such a platform could bring, including increased visibility, streamlined communication, and shared resources among entrepreneurs. This consensus provides a solid foundation for advancing the development and implementation of a centralized digital tourism strategy for the region. This intense interest reflects a growing awareness of the advantages brought by digital consolidation in managing tourist destinations, including resource sharing, communication optimization, and easier access to national and international markets. A shared platform could serve as a vital tool for integrating local tourism entrepreneurs into global tourism networks, facilitating coordination of marketing campaigns, reservation management, and effective response to the diverse needs of tourists. The establishment of such a platform would represent a qualitative step towards the professionalization of tourism in the Municipality of Belsh. It would strengthen its position in the sustainable rural tourism market. Moreover, this initiative could create a collaborative model that serves as an example for other rural destinations in Albania and the region, contributing to the broader development of digital tourism.

Key needs identified for digital development in Belsh

The most frequently cited need is the creation of an official tourism website for Belsh (51%), reflecting strong demand for a centralized, professional online presence. This is followed by requests for support in online marketing (27%) and collaboration with tour guides and other operators (22%), highlighting the importance of both promotion and network-building. These data are presented in the Table 7.

Table 7

Support is desired from the municipality and institutions for improving online promotion

Statement	Percentage (%)
Training for social media management	-
Creation of an official tourism website for Belsh	51 %
Support for online marketing	27 %
Collaboration with tour guides and other operators	22 %

Source: Authors' work

The above data reveal a clear focus among local tourism actors on improving online promotion through institutional interventions, with 51% expressing the need to create an official tourism website for the Municipality of Belsh. This demand reflects the need for a central platform that coherently represents Belsh's tourism offerings, providing a credible and professional image to potential visitors. Establishing an official website could serve as a foundation for coordinating promotional efforts and developing a strong digital identity, thereby increasing the visibility of tourist destinations in both national and international tourism markets. In addition to the request for an official website, 27% of operators seek support for online marketing, while 22% call for closer collaboration with tour guides and other operators. These data underscore the importance of a comprehensive, integrated approach that extends beyond the development of digital infrastructure to include empowering the local network of tourism entrepreneurs. Support in online marketing may include training programs, assistance in developing promotional campaigns, and access to technological tools. At the same time, collaboration with local stakeholders ensures cohesion and synergy within the tourism offer. This model of support from local institutions is essential to overcoming the challenges identified in the aforementioned data by addressing deficiencies in technological capacities, financial resources, and fragmented promotion strategies. Such a focus on developing digital infrastructure and strengthening cooperation among entrepreneurs and local actors would create favorable conditions for sustainable tourism growth in the Municipality of Belsh. Within this framework, local institutions must play a key role in guiding and coordinating the development of e-Tourism, enhancing local capacities in line with entrepreneurs' actual needs.

Tourism development and decision-makers in Belsh

Interviews with representatives of the Municipality of Belsh reveal an explicit institutional commitment to developing sustainable tourism in the region, with a focus on agritourism, ecotourism, and the preservation of cultural heritage. This commitment includes active participation in the international "Green Destinations" program, which aims to establish global standards for sustainable destination management, as well as the organization of cultural events that strengthen local identity and community engagement. Through these efforts, the Municipality seeks to integrate economic development with the conservation of natural and cultural values, positioning Belsh as a sustainable and attractive tourist destination. Regarding digital promotion, the interviews indicate that the Municipality of Belsh has begun developing an e-Tourism strategy, which encompasses the use of social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), the production of promotional materials, and participation in international networks of sustainable destinations (Table 8).

Table 8

Summary of interviews with key decision-makers in the tourism sector of the Municipality of Belsh

Questions	Responses (their focus)
1. What are the current municipal policies for tourism development in Belsh?	The Municipality of Belsh is focused on developing sustainable tourism, including ecotourism and agrotourism, as well as the preservation of cultural heritage. Its participation in the international program “Green Destinations” marks a significant step toward sustainable management. Additionally, cultural events and festivals are organized to promote local traditions.
2. Is there a digital strategy for promoting the destination?	The municipality has begun developing a digital promotion strategy across social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. By leveraging global online platforms, Belsh aims to promote its tourism potential both nationally and internationally. Digital promotional materials have also been prepared for tourism fairs and online marketing efforts.
3. To what extent is the local community involved in online tourism initiatives?	The local community is gradually becoming involved, with businesses increasingly establishing a presence on social media and participating in digitally promoted events. However, the lack of a unified platform and limited digital training constrain the potential for broader and more coordinated cooperation.
4. Have training sessions or technical assistance been provided to local actors in the field of technology??	Training and technical assistance have been provided mainly through international donor-supported projects, such as STEP Enhancement and IADSA. Nonetheless, these initiatives require expansion and consolidation to build long-term digital capacities within the community.
5. What are the municipality's objectives for developing an integrated e-Tourism platform for Belsh?	The Municipality of Belsh aims to establish an official tourism platform that includes an interactive map and local operators, enhancing access to information and enabling better promotion via social media and Google. This initiative is expected to strengthen local cooperation and foster sustainable tourism development in the region.

Source: Authors' work

The strategies identified throughout the interviews remain at an early, fragmented stage, lacking the well-defined digital infrastructure necessary for their effective implementation. Local community involvement in online activities is limited due to the absence of training and the essential infrastructure required for joint management. The strategic goal of creating an integrated e-Tourism platform reflects the need to enhance coordination, improve access to information, and foster collaboration among local stakeholders, thereby transforming digital tourism into a catalyst for sustainable development and economic diversification within the Municipality of Belsh. This approach underscores the critical role of digitalization as a catalyst for advancing rural tourism in line with contemporary global demands. To sum up, the interviews and their responses support the assertion that e-Tourism is not merely a promotional tool but a strategic instrument and catalyst for the comprehensive and sustainable development of rural tourist destinations such as Belsh.

Discussion

Based on the data from the questionnaire administered to entrepreneurs and municipal representatives in Belsh, it can be concluded that e-Tourism is currently in an early stage of development, yet it also represents a significant opportunity for

promoting and stimulating rural and sustainable tourism. The use of social media platforms is primarily on Instagram, whereas more structured, international platforms such as Google Maps and TripAdvisor are noticeably absent or underutilized. This situation indicates that local actors tend to view social networks more as spontaneous advertising tools than as instruments for building a sustainable, professionally managed tourism identity. The sporadic, non-strategic use of online platforms reflects a lack of training, technical knowledge, and adequate infrastructure, all of which limit their potential to compete in both national and international tourism markets. While tourism entrepreneurs recognize the positive impact of a digital presence, their activity remains unsystematic, revealing a gap between awareness of the necessity and the capacity to implement it effectively. This underscores the urgent need for structured policies that support the development of technological capacities and digital education for the local community, viewing social media communication not merely as advertising but as a strategic approach for cultivating sustainable relationships with visitors and developing an active virtual community. In this context, the frequency of posts and the quality of content emerge as two critical elements that require not only individual commitment but also professional guidance and collective support. Without such an intervention, the online presence risks remaining superficial and failing to have a tangible impact on rural tourism development. Furthermore, the data highlight a growing awareness of the role technology plays in increasing visitor flows, with 94% of respondents acknowledging the positive influence of online platforms on tourism. This broad support from local operators creates a solid foundation for the further development of a joint digital strategy. The main challenges focus on the lack of technological training, limited time (which may be related to the family nature of the business and the low number of employees), and financial resources, indicating the need for organized interventions by local authorities through the creation of supportive infrastructure such as professional training, technical assistance, and institutional promotion of integrated platforms.

Institutional support and Belsh Municipality's commitment to developing an integrated digital platform for tourism demonstrate efforts to move from fragmented individual actions toward a coordinated, professional model. The 100% interest among entrepreneurs in a shared platform and their requests to create an official website are direct indicators of their readiness to collaborate and build a unified destination identity. In this context, e-Tourism emerges not merely as a technological solution but as a transformative tool and catalyst for the sustainable development of rural tourism in Belsh. This requires coordinated engagement among public institutions, the private sector, and the local community to realize the potential of digital platforms to promote destinations fully. Such an integrated approach can also help increase visitor trust by providing a more organized and sustainable experience at every stage of their journey. Within this framework, the effective use of e-Tourism in Belsh Municipality can catalyze sustainable rural tourism, enhancing not only the number of visitors but also the quality of the tourist experience and collaboration among local actors. Through a well-defined digital strategy that includes investments in infrastructure, professional training, and institutional coordination, Belsh Municipality has the potential to establish itself as an innovative destination that preserves and promotes its natural and cultural values.

Conclusion

Based on a comprehensive and detailed analysis of data collected through questionnaires and interviews with local entrepreneurs and representatives of local institutions in the municipality of Belsh, significant potential emerges for the role of e-

Tourism in fostering the development and promotion of sustainable rural tourism. Local actors demonstrate a clear awareness of the positive impact that digital platforms and social media have on increasing visitor flows, alongside a pronounced willingness to engage more actively in these online platforms. This is coupled with concrete demands for institutional support, specialized training, and the creation of a shared digital platform dedicated to promoting the municipality of Belsh. Within this framework, the study confirms that e-Tourism is not merely a technical tool but rather a strategic catalyst that fundamentally transforms the management, promotion, and development of rural tourism destinations. Through digitalization and inter-institutional collaboration, e-Tourism can be operationalized as an effective model to enhance both the competitiveness and sustainability of tourism in rural areas. As a final point, the development of an integrated and functional e-Tourism model in the municipality of Belsh could serve as a benchmark practice for other rural municipalities in Albania. This underscores the importance of digitalization and institutional coordination as key factors for the optimal and sustainable exploitation of local tourism potentials. Such a model represents an innovative approach that not only enhances the visibility of destinations but also empowers local communities in their efforts to achieve economic and social development in rural regions.

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