

## DIGITAL MARKETING OF BLUE TOURISM IN A TRANSITION COUNTRY

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### **I. Objectives**

Around 72% of the Earth's surface is covered by water, which includes marine and coastal ecosystems that provide valuable ecological and economic resources (Kontakos, 2019). The main objective of this paper is to discover how much customers in a transition country value coastal tourism, as an integer part of the blue economy. Moreover, it encompasses how much the use of technology during the information, selection, and booking process has developed the customers' habits and opportunities regarding tourism all over the year and throughout the region and the world. Lying at the Adriatic Sea, with a 362 km long coastline and a Mediterranean climate, Albania has great potential to develop coastal tourism at the level of a well-established industry. As it has been widely affected by globalization, like many other countries in the world and of the region, its development is inevitably connected to technological development (Intermar South Baltic, 2021). The economic and social boost that these trends give to a small transition country is enormous, but the research done by the research community is not enough to foster and exhaust the related opportunities. Studies such as about mind genomics for tourism advertisement (Iollari *et al.*,

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2019), marketing and tourism destination development (Matja *et al.*, 2015), and the impact of new media on tourism in protected areas (Kekezi, 2019), are not enough to address the recent developments in terms of technology and lifestyle in our society with regard to tourism in a country where blue tourism should be at the main focus. The gap in the literature to be filled and the findings of this study should inspire our business, legislative, cultural, and academic community to fill this gap and contribute to the development of a crucial sector in this transition country.

## 2. Theoretical Background

The “Blue Growth” strategy comprises three main components or pillars. Firstly, it involves a targeted approach towards specific activities like aquaculture, coastal tourism, marine biotechnology, ocean energy, and the utilization of seabeds. Secondly, it includes specific measures for integrated maritime policy, such as improving knowledge and access to maritime information, maritime spatial planning to manage maritime activities efficiently and sustainably, and integrated maritime surveillance. Finally, it encompasses strategies for individual sea basins aimed at achieving an optimal combination of sustainable development measures that consider local climatic, oceanographic, economic, cultural, and social factors. These strategies apply to several sea basins, including the Mediterranean Sea, the Adriatic Sea, the Ionian Sea, and the Black Sea, which are closest to us (Kontakos, 2019).

Blue tourism, which refers to marine-based tourism activities such as diving, snorkeling, and boat trips, has been influenced by the growth of e-commerce and digital marketing. A study by Buhalis (2019) explored the impact of digital marketing on the tourism industry and found that it has led to the emergence of new business models, including online travel agencies and destination management organizations. These platforms have made it easier for travelers to plan and book marine-based activities such as scuba diving and snorkeling.

According to Naipeng, (2017) digital technologies have transformed the way tourists access information about destinations and make travel

arrangements. The UNWTO General Assembly – Special Session on Smart Tourism highlights the importance of digital marketing in promoting marine-based tourism activities, as well as the need for destinations to adapt to changing consumer preferences.

In a study on the use of social media in promoting marine-based tourism, Pagel *et al.* (2020) found that social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram play a significant role in shaping tourists' perceptions and expectations of blue tourism, which refers to marine-based tourism activities such as diving, snorkeling, and visiting underwater wildlife, has been influenced by the growth of e-commerce and digital marketing of marine-based activities.

The study highlights the importance of digital marketing in creating engaging content and targeting specific audience segments.

On the other hand, e-commerce and blue tourism have brought some major changes in customer habits regarding their leisure time, such as related to the time and duration of their vacations, well as their booking time. A study by Koo *et al.* (2015) on the use of social media in tourism found that online marketing can help destinations and tourism businesses reach new markets and extend their tourism seasons. Another author (Francesch, 2020) notes that e-commerce has enabled tourism businesses to offer year-round services and promote off-season activities, which can help to extend the tourism season and build sustainable tourism.

In a study on the impact of digital technology on the tourism industry, Buhalis and Law (2008) note that e-commerce has enabled tourism businesses to develop new products and services, as well as reach new markets. The authors suggest that this can help to extend the tourism season and reduce the seasonality of tourism.

A report by the European Travel Commission (2017) on the use of digital technology in tourism notes that e-commerce has enabled tourism businesses to offer more personalized and targeted marketing, which can help to attract tourists during the shoulder season and off-season. The report suggests that this can help to extend the tourism season and reduce the negative impacts of seasonality on the tourism industry.

As seen above, being more reachable by the public because of the technological development regarding bookings and getting informed on tourism opportunities all over the year, has brought tourism providers to diversify and include in their offerings also the wellness area, in the framework of product differentiation based on external market factors.

In a study on the impact of tourism on coastal areas, Hall (2002) notes that the development of tourism facilities such as swimming pools, saunas, and spas has helped to extend the tourism season beyond the summer months. The author suggests that these amenities can attract tourists during the shoulder season and off-season when the weather is less favorable for outdoor activities.

The influence of service quality on tourist satisfaction and loyalty has shown that amenities such as swimming pools and SPA areas have a positive impact on tourist satisfaction and can help to extend the tourism season. Tourism businesses can use these amenities to differentiate themselves from competitors and attract tourists during the shoulder season and off-season. The development of tourism facilities such as swimming pools and saunas can help to extend the tourism season and reduce the negative impacts of seasonality on the tourism industry. The report suggests that offering a wider range of amenities can attract tourists during the shoulder season and off-season and generate additional revenue for tourism businesses (Lindell, 2019).

This information is for sure the result of tourists' feedback collection through electronic means (Höpken *et al.*, 2015).

A study by Kim and Lee (2017) on the influence of social media on travel planning behavior found that travelers who use social media platforms are more likely to make early bookings. The authors suggest that this is due to the abundance of information available online, which allows travelers to plan their trips in advance and make informed decisions.

In a study on the impact of online reviews on hotel booking behavior, Xiang *et al.* (2017) found that customers who read online reviews are more likely to book their accommodations early. The authors suggest that this is due to the perceived scarcity of rooms during peak travel periods, which motivates customers to book early to ensure they secure their desired accommodations.

A report by the European Travel Commission (2019) on the use of digital technology in tourism notes that e-commerce has enabled tourism businesses to offer early booking discounts and other incentives to encourage customers to book their trips in advance. The report suggests that this has influenced the early booking habits/behavior of customers and has helped to reduce the negative impacts of seasonality on the tourism industry.

The use of different online platforms/applications has not influenced our way of making vacations, but also opened us up to the world and given us the same opportunities also for tourism abroad, by internationalizing this experience. Therefore, the hypothesis regarding this aspect will be raised also for customers' tourism behavioral choices abroad regarding tourism season, booking time, and duration of vacations.

The hypothesis supported by this literature review, are the following:

- H.1: E-Commerce and digital marketing have increased blue tourism choices.
- H.2: E-commerce and digital marketing have extended the blue tourism season beyond the summer months, increased the early booking habits of customers, and influenced the duration of vacations locally.
- H.3: E-commerce and digital marketing have extended the blue tourism season beyond the summer months, increased the early booking habits of customers, and influenced the duration of vacations abroad/overseas.
- H.4: Offering wellness opportunities inside hotels and other vacation accommodations opportunities has extended the season of blue tourism beyond the summer months and influenced the duration of the vacations.

### **3. Methodology**

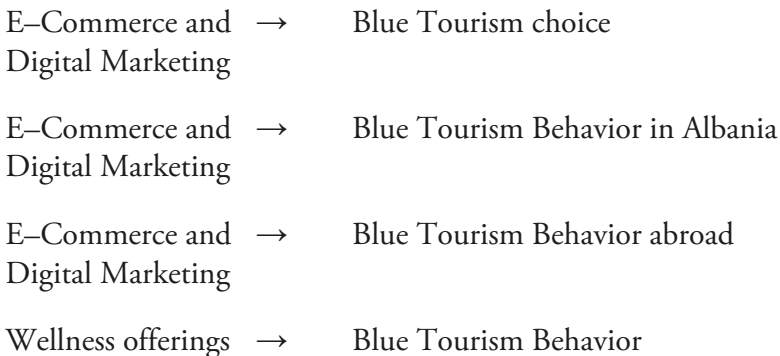
This study will use primary data collected through a questionnaire spread via electronic means of communication to students, different professionals employed in public administration and the private sector as well as in civil society organizations in Albania, the Balkans, and

different parts of the European Union. As seen in the literature review part above, different scientific research using different models was studied. Data are analyzed and tested using econometric methods.

The measured features that propose the conceptual model, namely blue tourism choices, and tourism customer behavior in Albania and of Albanians abroad were assessed using the 5 points of the Likert–Scale type (Yoo *et al.*, 2018).

The main independent variable (of the first three hypotheses) is E–Commerce and Digital Marketing which is the synthesis of the questions regarding the ways customers do get in touch with tourist information on the one side, and the frequency that they are exposed to blue tourism advertising, which shapes their decision–making. Another independent variable is the “Wellness offerings” of the fourth hypothesis, which, as can be seen in the literature review above, is also another product that has been implemented by tourist operators because of the spread of the technology. On the other side, there are the dependent variables, “blue tourism choice, which shows how much e–commerce and digital marketing have influenced customer choices towards coastal destinations. “Blue tourism behavior” refers to the second and third hypotheses (partially to the fourth too) relating to the extended blue tourism season beyond the summer months, increased the early booking habits of customers, and influenced the duration of vacations abroad/overseas.

Moreover, we described also the demographical aspects underlying the customers’ choices, such as age, gender, income, and education, using the descriptive statistic (Kladou & Mavragani, 2015).



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework.

#### 4. Expected Findings

After finishing the study, we expect that the results will indicate a good trend in our prognoses. We suppose that technology in the searching and decision-making process regarding blue tourism in our country, with a long transition history, will have had a strong influence during the last years. It has also shaped our way of experiencing blue tourism, by extending our vacation season, and our standards. It has helped us know better the potential that our country has in this sector, but also what the world has to offer in this matter. Using new forms of e-commerce and digital marketing has shaped the way our touristic operators do business, but also our way of experiencing blue tourism.

Our hopes are high that the hypothesis will be supported because the results will demonstrate that technology has increased blue tourism in our country, the opening of Albanians towards new forms and countries to do tourism, and the introduction of new products to attract tourists throughout the year, by transforming the way people in a transition country enjoy leisure time in coastal areas.

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