DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN TOURISM: LEVERAGING PRACTICAL DIGITAL GUIDES FOR PROMOTING THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

CZU: 338.486:[004.771+004.8](478)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.53486/tids2026.13

VALENTINA CAPAŢINA
Associate Professor,
Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova
e-mail: valentina@ase.md
ORCID ID: 0009-0007-9767-7243

IRINA ISPIR
e-mail: ispiririna7@gmail.com
Bevent Production, Republic of Moldova

ADRIANA PROCA
e-mail: adrianaproca13@gmail.com
Vector Academy, Republic of Moldova

Abstract. Digital transformation of the tourism sector represents one of the most significant changes in how destinations are promoted, experienced, and managed in the 21st century. The Republic of Moldova, as an emerging tourist destination in Eastern Europe, faces the dual challenge of increasing its international visibility while adapting to the digital expectations of modern travelers, especially Millennials and Generation Z.
The aim of the paper is to investigate the role of practical digital guides as tools of tourism promotion and destination management, with a specific focus on the Republic of Moldova.
The research question addressed is: how can digital guides increase tourist awareness, improve visitor experience, and contribute to sustainable tourism development in Moldova?
The study uses a *mixed methods* approach, combining a review of the specialized literature on digital tourism, analysis of national digital platforms (including Village Travel Bot, Moldova.travel, and "Discover Moldova: Practical Guide") and secondary data from national and international tourism statistics.
The results indicate that digital guides significantly improve navigation, cultural engagement, and economic activity in both urban and rural areas. "Discover Moldova: Practical Guide", published as an interactive digital brochure via Simplebooklet, illustrates how structured, user - friendly digital content can serve as a bridge between the destination's cultural heritage and the international traveler.
The article also highlights key trends, including AI-based travel assistants, augmented reality in cultural heritage sites, and predictive mobility maps as essential technologies for the future of Moldovan tourism.
The conclusions underscore the need for institutional support, collaboration among various stakeholders, and ongoing digital innovation to position Moldova competitively on the European and global tourism map.

Keywords: digital tourism, digital guide, tourism promotion, destination management, digital transformation.

JEL Classification: L83, O33, Z32

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of mobile devices and internet connectivity has fundamentally changed the way tourists plan, experience, and share travel experiences. According to a global study conducted by American Express Travel, approximately 70% of Millennial and Gen Z travelers choose

destinations based on the quality of the anticipated experience, not just the destination itself (InfoEra, 2025). At the same time, recent trends in European tourism indicate a paradigm shift: away from mass tourism and towards a form of tourism that emphasizes value, quality, and sustainability. According to an analysis published by the Employers' Association of the Tourism Industry in Moldova (APIT) (2026), the competitiveness of destinations is no longer determined exclusively by the number of visitors, but by their ability to offer relevant experiences, engage the local economy, and use digital technologies to personalize services. This shift is of crucial importance for emerging destinations such as the Republic of Moldova, which can leverage their authenticity and flexibility to position themselves strategically on the European tourism market.

This behavioral change exerts enormous pressure on destination management organizations and other tourism stakeholders, driving them to adopt digital tools capable of providing personalized, engaging, and accessible travel information.

The Republic of Moldova, located in Eastern Europe and endowed with a rich cultural heritage, award winning wine routes, and diverse natural landscapes, has historically faced limited international visibility. The tourism sector contributes approximately 3% to Moldova's GDP, and technology enhanced experiences have been identified as a key driver for extending visitor length of stay and expenditure (NBS). Between 2020 and 2026, the adoption of digital mapping tools by tourists visiting Moldova grew by 78%, with 72% of tourists currently using digital maps for navigation and visit planning (AboutMoldova, 2025).

Several national digital tourism initiatives have emerged to address this gap. Village Travel Bot, an interactive Telegram based chatbot, was designated the most innovative tourism solution in 2024 for its contribution to the digitalization of rural tourism experiences (IPN, 2024). Moldova.travel, the national tourism promotion portal, offers itineraries, virtual tours, and information on over 500 tourist attractions. Additionally, digital content such as "Discover Moldova: Practical Guide" published on the Simplebooklet platform demonstrates grassroots efforts to aggregate and disseminate practical destination information for international audiences.

The ***research problem*** underlying this paper concerns how practical digital guides can serve as effective tools for the promotion and sustainable development of tourism in the Republic of Moldova.

The ***relevance of the research*** derives from the need to adapt the tourism sector of the Republic of Moldova to new international digital trends and from the importance of using modern technologies to increase the competitiveness of the tourist destination.

The ***aim*** of this article is to investigate the role of practical digital guides in the process of digital transformation of tourism and to highlight their contribution to the promotion of the Republic of Moldova as a tourist destination.

Furthermore, the research underlines the ***importance of digital innovation*** for increasing competitiveness and supporting the sustainable development of the national tourism sector.

***Main Objectives*:**

1. Analyzing the role of digital guides within the broader context of digital transformation of tourism;
2. Evaluating the impact of existing digital platforms and guides on the tourism sector in the Republic of Moldova;
3. Identifying the main technological trends that can contribute to strengthening Moldova's competitiveness as a tourist destination.

MAIN CONTENT

1. Materials and Methods

The research uses a mixed methodological approach, combining qualitative content analysis with secondary quantitative data. The main documentary sources include:

1. "Discover Moldova: Practical Guide", an interactive digital brochure published on the Simplebooklet platform (2025), which provides structured information for international visitors;
2. The official thematic framework of the TIDS 2026 conference, focused on digital transformation, interdisciplinary applications, and societal impact;
3. Publicly available reports and articles on digital tourism platforms in the Republic of Moldova.

Secondary quantitative data were extracted from national tourism statistics provided by the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, reports of the National Tourism Office, and analyses published by independent digital research agencies. The landscape of digital platforms was assessed through a structured content analysis of three key platforms: Village Travel Bot, Moldova.travel, and the Discover Moldova digital guide.

The literature review focused on peer reviewed articles and industry reports on digital transformation in tourism, smart destination management, and the role of information technology in destination marketing. Searches were conducted using Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and institutional digital archives. The Harvard referencing system was applied co„nsistently throughout the paper.

2. Results and Discussions

The analysis of Moldova's digital tourism ecosystem reveals a rapidly evolving landscape. The National Bureau of Statistics reported that in the period January–September 2025, collective tourist accommodation structures were visited by 400,000 tourists, signaling a continuation of the sector's post pandemic recovery (statistica.gov.md, 2025). The results confirm trends identified at the European level, where the emphasis is shifting from quantitative to qualitative tourism growth. According to the Employers' Association of the Tourism Industry in Moldova, competitive destinations are those that manage to attract tourists with greater economic value, extend the length of stay, and distribute benefits throughout the region. In this context, the digital guides analyzed in this study directly contribute to achieving these objectives, facilitating access to personalized information and promoting authentic experiences. Digital tools are increasingly identified as drivers of this recovery, with 54% of local businesses in Moldova reporting increases in visitor numbers attributable to digital mapping platforms and guides, and the average length of stay having increased by 26% among tourists who used digital tools to plan their visit (AboutMoldova, 2025).

"Discover Moldova: Practical Guide", created as an interactive digital brochure, exemplifies the potential of user generated digital content. Unlike static PDFs or traditional printed guides, interactive digital brochures hosted on platforms such as Simplebooklet allow the integration of rich media content, hyperlink navigation, and accessibility across multiple devices. These features align directly with the needs of Millennial and Gen Z travelers, who increasingly rely on mobile information sources for planning and navigating travel experiences.

A comparative assessment of the four analyzed platforms is presented in Table 1. The results indicate that Moldova.travel offers the broadest content coverage, while Village Travel Bot excels in conversational interactivity and personalized recommendations. The "Discover Moldova Guide",

although narrower in scope, demonstrates high accessibility and serves as an effective introductory information resource for first time visitors to Moldova.

Table 1. Comparative assessment of the main digital tourism platforms in Moldova.

Platform	Content Accessibility	Multilingual Support	Interactive Functionality	Booking Integration
Moldova.travel	High	English, Romanian, Russian	Virtual tours, itineraries	Partial
Village Travel Bot	Medium	Romanian, English	AI Chatbot, real time Q&A	Activity bookings
Discover Moldova Guide	High	Romanian, English	Hyperlinks, rich media	None
Cahul.travel	Medium	Romanian	Basic	Accommodation

Source: *Authors' own elaboration based on platform content analysis (2025–2026).*

The digitalization of heritage sites represents another high-impact opportunity. Digital storytelling through augmented reality (AR) features for example, at the Orheiul Vechi monastic complex increases cultural engagement by 25% and supports the conservation of Moldova's intangible heritage (AboutMoldova, 2025). Rural areas such as the Purcari wine region, Codrii Forest, and Saharna Waterfall have recorded increases in digital map usage of up to 120% over the last two years, demonstrating that digital tools are not limited to urban tourism but are equally transformative for rural tourism circuits and ecotourism (AboutMoldova, 2025).

Despite these advances, a number of significant challenges persist. Limited internet connectivity in remote areas of the Republic of Moldova continues to affect the real time functionality of digital tourism platforms, particularly those based on interactivity such as chatbots or virtual tours. However, certain resources, such as "Discover Moldova: Practical Guide", offer the option to download content in PDF format, which allows its use even in the absence of an internet connection, thereby increasing accessibility for tourists.

Furthermore, as shown in the table data, the analyzed platforms present different levels of accessibility and functionality. For example, Moldova.travel offers diversified content and extensive multilingual support, but booking integration is only partial. In contrast, AI based applications such as Village Travel Bot facilitate real time interaction but depend directly on internet connectivity. Other platforms, such as Cahul.travel, offer basic functionality and limited booking options, highlighting the need for continued development of digital tourism infrastructure.

Looking ahead, the InfoEra report (2025) identifies ten major digital trends that will shape global tourism by 2026, several of which are directly applicable to Moldova:

1. Personal AI assistants ("Travel Concierge") for complete trip planning: recommendations, bookings, route optimization, full personalization.
2. Augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR) for interactive tours, digital museums, 3D reconstructions, increased tourist engagement.
3. Digital Twin for tourist destinations 3D digital replicas of cities for visitor flow management and personalized experiences.
4. Robots in hotels, airports, and museums for automated check-in, guidance, and robotic hospitality services.
5. Web3 Tourism for NFTs, tokenized tickets, digital reputation, and blockchain payments.

6. Predictive maps and smart mobility for optimized routes based on traffic, weather, and tourist flow.
7. Autonomous hotels (fully self-service): digital check-in, smart rooms, AI based dynamic pricing.
8. Digital culinary tourism: personalized culinary itineraries + AI recommendations + integrated bookings.
9. Biometric security and digital travel identity: facial scanning, automated airport access, and integrated services.
10. "City-as-a-Service" platforms: cities as integrated digital ecosystems (transport, restaurants, guides, events).

At the local level, the EkoApp Moldova application, launched by the National Tourism Office in July 2025, marks a significant institutional commitment to digital tourism development (financialcontent.com, 2025).

To better understand the current position of digital guides in promoting tourism in the Republic of Moldova, a **SWOT** analysis (*S – Strengths*; *W – Weaknesses*; *O – Opportunities*; *T – Threats*) is presented below, highlighting the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in this area.

***Strengths*:** Internal characteristics and resources supporting a successful outcome

- Digital tourism platforms exist (e.g., Moldova.travel);
- Tourists are increasingly using smartphones and online maps for travel;
- Useful and easily accessible digital guides exist, such as "Discover Moldova".

Weaknesses: Internal characteristics and resources impeding a successful outcome

- Not all tourism platforms are interconnected;
- Some areas of the country have poor internet connectivity;
- Some websites do not have full booking functionality.

***Opportunities*:** External factors that can be leveraged to the project's or business's advantage

- New technologies (AI, smart applications) are developing rapidly;
- More and more tourists are seeking authentic experiences, and Moldova can offer these;
- Rural tourism can be developed through digital promotion.

Threats: External factors that may have a potentially damaging effect on the project or business

- Other countries already have more advanced digital tourism systems;
- Technology changes very rapidly and requires constant investment;
- Tourists have increasingly high expectations of digital services.

The SWOT analysis highlights the fact that the Republic of Moldova has significant potential for the development of digital tourism, supported by increased use of mobile technologies and the emergence of digital platforms dedicated to destination promotion. At the same time, the existence of limitations related to digital infrastructure and the integration of tourism services demonstrates the need for coordinated investments and strategies at the institutional level. Leveraging the opportunities offered by new technologies and the growing interest in authentic experiences can contribute to strengthening the Republic of Moldova's competitiveness on the international tourism market.

CONCLUSIONS

In line with European trends, the future of tourism in the Republic of Moldova depends on the capacity to build a model based on value, technology, and institutional coordination. Practical digital guides can become an essential tool in this transition, contributing to the creation of a coherent, smart, and competitive destination. This paper has demonstrated that practical digital guides play an essential role in the promotion and sustainable development of tourism in the Republic of Moldova. Three main conclusions emerge from the research.

Firstly, the digital transformation of Moldova's tourism sector is already underway, evidenced by the growing adoption of mobile applications, interactive chatbots, and digital portals. Between 2020 and 2026, the adoption of digital tools among tourists visiting Moldova grew by 78%, with measurable positive effects on visitor satisfaction, average length of stay, and revenues of local businesses.

Secondly, student and community produced digital content, such as "Discover Moldova: Practical Guide", complements official tourism platforms by providing accessible, English language, practically oriented information for international visitors. The novelty and originality of such grassroots digital resources lie in their agility they can be updated quickly, distributed through social networks at negligible cost, and adapted to specific visitor profiles that institutional platforms may overlook.

Also, the study identifies augmented reality, AI based travel assistants, and integrated smart mobility platforms as the most promising technological frontiers for Moldova's tourism sector. Future research should focus on measuring the real economic and behavioral impact of these technologies through the collection of primary data (surveys and field experiments) at major tourist attractions in Moldova. A significant limitation of the present study is its reliance on secondary data; long term primary research would strengthen the evidence base for policy makers.

In summary, Moldova possesses the digital resources, cultural wealth, and institutional momentum necessary to position itself as a competitive, technology-driven travel destination. Sustainable collaboration among various stakeholders, including the National Tourism Board, academic institutions, IT developers, and content creators will be crucial to transforming this potential into measurable growth.

REFERENCES

AboutMoldova, 2025. How Digital Mapping Tourism Moldova is Revolutionizing the Moldova Travel Guide Map Experience. AboutMoldova, 9 September. Available at: https://aboutmoldova.md/en/view_articles_post.php?id=3314 [Accessed 20.04.2026].

Employers' Association of the Tourism Industry in the Republic of Moldova – APIT, 2026. The new European tourism code: why 2026 is unlike anything that came before. Facebook post, 15 April. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/APITRM/posts/noul-cod-al-turismului-europeande-ce-2026-nu-mai-seam%C4%83n%C4%83-cu-nimic-din-ce-a-fost-/1288190076745005/ [Accessed 20.04.2026].

financialcontent.com, 2025. Moldova Forges a Future in Tourism: Blending Heritage, Eco-Adventures and Tech Innovation. Market Minute, 6 October. Available at: https://markets.financialcontent.com/stocks/article/marketminute-2025-10-6-moldova-forges-a-future-in-tourism-blending-heritage-eco-adventures-and-tech-innovation [Accessed 22.04.2026].

InfoEra, 2025. How Innovations Are Transforming Tourism. InfoEra Blog, 12 December. Available at: https://infoera.md/en/blog/57 [Accessed 22.04.2026].

Interreg Europe, 2024. Tourism Strategies and Roadmaps for Supporting SMEs in Moldova. Interreg Europe, 23 July. Available at: https://www.interregeurope.eu/find-policy-solutions/expert-support-reports/tourism-strategies-and-roadmaps-for-supporting-smes-in-moldova [Accessed 25.04.2026].

IPN, 2024. Free Tourist App Village Travel Bot, Innovation in Digital Rural Tourism. IPN News Agency, 8 October. Available at: https://www.old.ipn.md/en/free-tourist-app-village-travel-bot-innovation-in-digital-rural-tourism-7967_1107862.html [Accessed 22.04.2026].

Moldova.travel, 2026. Official National Tourism Portal of the Republic of Moldova. Available at: https://moldova.travel [Accessed 22.04.2026].

simplebooklet.com, 2025. Discover Moldova: Practical Guide (1). Simplebooklet. Available at: https://simplebooklet.com/discovermoldovapracticalguid1 [Accessed 25.04.2026].

statistica.gov.md, 2025. Statistics on tourist accommodation, January–September 2025. National Bureau of Statistics. Statistical indicator details. Available at: https://statistica.gov.md/ro/statistic_indicator_details/11 [Accessed 22.04.2026].

VillageTravel.md, 2024. Village Travel Bot – Interactive Telegram Chatbot for Rural Tourism in Moldova. Available at: https://www.villagetravel.md [Accessed 25.04.2026].

World Bank, 2025. From Queues to Clicks: Digitalization Transforms Moldova's Public Services. World Bank Feature Story, 2 December. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2025/12/02/from-queues-to-clicks-digitalization-transforms-moldova-s-public-services [Accessed 22.04.2026].