

Article

Digitalization of the Alternative Tourism Marketplace: Evidence from an EU Peripheral Economy

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Abstract: Tourism development has a significant contribution to the sustainable development of countries and regions through job creation, infrastructure development, cultural preservation, community empowerment, and revenue increase. Within this context, digitalization in the different facets of the tourism marketplace is a powerful tool that promotes competitiveness and economic growth, sustainability, innovation, and regional coherence. Digitalization also calls for the industry actors to have meaningful integration of novel technologies and practices in their operations and strategy. Despite the importance of digital technologies as a competitive antecedent for hospitality ventures, the extant research is mainly anchored on digital marketing and its associations with traditional mass tourism activity. Evidence on other facets of digitalization is far less appreciated, especially in the niche segment of the alternative tourism marketplace. Considering the above developments, our research aim is to assess the contribution of a digital business ecosystem, including a wide array of digital applications, to the competitiveness of the hospitality industry in Greece, with a focus on alternative tourism activities. Our research draws on data collected from a sample of local ventures to investigate the impact of digital technologies on tourists' attraction and company growth. In the main, our findings record the positive impacts of digitalization, with internet-based technologies standing out as the most influential medium to boost growth and hotels' sustainability. We contribute by showing that in cases where hospitality ventures remain digitally illiterate, they will most probably face severe competition losses.

Keywords: alternative tourism; digitalization; digital technologies; promotion; Greece; public policy



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1. Introduction

The hospitality and tourism industry constitutes one of the most profitable sectors of the service economy and experiences exponential growth owing to the development of transportation, advancements in infrastructure, and, apparently, user-friendly digital platforms that facilitate tourist flows moving around the globe by exploiting the best available opportunities [1,2]. The contribution of the global tourism industry and travel sector reached a record of \$9.9 trillion in 2023 and contributed 9.1% to the global GDP, an increase of 23.2% with respect to the previous year [3]. However, the marketplace is extremely vulnerable to exogenous shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, military tensions, economic crises, and sustainability challenges [4–6]. For instance, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, a decline of 61% in the tourism flows around the globe was observed in the period 2021–2022 compared to 2019–2020 [7]. A similar trend was recorded in European destinations that experienced a 41% drop in visitor rates during January and March 2022 (ibid.). For Greece in particular, an EU peripheral economy where tourism is a key pillar for growth and employment, tourist arrivals hit a record low in July 2019 with 3,881,988 travelers [8,9]. Recent disruptions have already influenced travel habits,

e.g., people will avoid traveling in groups, while hygiene and health conditions in the host destinations seem important factors in travel decisions [10].

Number of arrivals, hotel turnover, booking patterns, and other relevant data frame the performance levels of hospitality ventures. However, it is the dynamic nature of tourists' preferences that trigger the development of the hospitality industry and calls for new and radical approaches to the touristic experience. Thus, a new area of research in the tourism and hospitality field concerns the development of the services offered in more specialized categories, such as alternative tourism [11,12]. Although there is not a common consensus about the definition of alternative tourism, it is typically closely aligned with innovative, specialist, and niche tourism types. Alternative tourism initially emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as a response to the negative impacts of mass tourism, seeking to provide more authentic experiences to travelers [13]. It also relates to environmental sustainability by creating an interdependent relationship between tourism and the environment to reverse the ramifications of the rapid growth of tourism on environmental degradation [11,12]. It contributes to the economic development of regions and countries not only in a direct manner (such as with increased employment and foreign exchange revenues) but also with externalities to third parties [14]. Today, it promises to provide a more sustainable solution by eliminating the negative imprints of mass/traditional tourism activity. This is an imperative of our times; as Sharpley [15] posits there is evidently a pressing need to fundamentally rethink how tourism is produced, managed, and consumed.

To promote the concept of "alternative" vacations, the hospitality industry needs to introduce novel methods to attract visitors. The digital transformation of the industry is a pathway towards this direction: the adoption of digital tools is an undisputable way to promote a tourism and hotel product, trademark, or brand via all digital channels [16]. To further elaborate, digital applications and tools, such as the design of an attractive website including online booking and reservation options, viral and affiliate marketing techniques, artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, and extensive use of social media platforms have made travel more accessible and personalized, while also triggering innovation and the sustainability of the sector [17–19]. However, the contribution of digital technologies to the alternative tourism marketplace seems somehow fragmented. While there have been several attempts to explore various aspects of digitalization in the sector, these are disproportionately oriented towards the effects of digital technologies on macro environmental characteristics, such as economic development and social impact [20–22]; the association of a digital ecosystem, including a wide array of technologies, on firms' competitiveness and future growth is far less appreciated. In addition, alternative tourism impacts are mainly assessed in advanced and/or emerging economies [23]; the EU peripheral, Greek alternative tourism marketplace has not been effectively investigated in the academic literature so far.

Considering these developments, our research objective is to assess the impacts of digitalization on the growth and competitiveness of the ventures that include alternative tourism activities in their operations and strategy in Greece. By so doing, our study resolves around the incorporation of a digital ecosystem in the alternative segment of the tourism and hospitality industry in a marketplace that has not yet attracted significant attention from researchers. Specifically, we juxtapose traditional and digital advertising, and also address a wide array of digital technologies and consider their impact. By evaluating how tourists use different channels for searching information that helps them make informed decisions when it comes to choosing an alternative travel destination, as well as ventures' adoption of the relevant applications, we seek to provide meaningful insight into the local alternative tourism perspectives about the ways which digital technologies attract more customers and influence hotels' viability.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Alternative Tourism

In the current era, tourism has emerged as one of the most significant and rapidly expanding sectors of the global economy [24]. It occupies a pivotal role in fostering economic growth and enhancing the quality of life for citizens of various nations [25]. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) predicted that the number of tourists crossing international borders would surpass 1.5 billion by 2020, assuming there was no global pandemic. The evolving consumer preferences and heightened expectations of contemporary travelers require the swift adjustment of tourism services in multiple ways; alternative tourism is among the most popular.

Alternative tourism is a broad term used to define various types of activities that tourists seek [26,27]. It includes various forms such as ecotourism, religious tourism, cultural, and creative tourism. The purpose of alternative tourism is that it aims to create a sense of belonging and ease among individuals, ensuring their comfort with the environment, cuisine, music, dance, culture, and sports [11]. Alternative tourism relates to sustainable development: its main characteristics include carefully managed and regulated growth on a small scale, a wide range of activities offered either individually or in small groups, and a focus on immersing oneself in local cultures and traditional values. The active participation of local communities as investors, employees, and hosts is crucial in fostering the growth of alternative tourism [28].

The importance of alternative tourism in the growth of regional and local contexts is evident; however, for Greece, we have only data for mass/mainstream tourism activity. Following a sharp decline in 2020 due to the effects of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the hospitality and tourism sector in the country experienced a significant increase of about 75% in its contribution to the nation's GDP in 2021 [29]. The travel services balance exhibited a surplus of €9533.8 million, with the amount of revenues received from travel increasing by €6334.3 million, or 146.7%, to reach €10,653.1 million [29]. In terms of the allocation of expenses incurred by non-residents in Greece based on the purpose of their travel, personal travel constituted the largest portion of revenues in 2021, amounting to €20 billion [30]. Leisure activities constituted the largest portion of overall spending in this category, representing 50% of the total amount. The lack of more detailed evidence for the alternative tourism market in Greece is quite surprising; the country offers a variety of alternative tourism segments including conference tourism, agrotourism, sports tourism, health tourism, religious and cultural tourism, among others [31–34].

2.2. Digitalization of Tourism and Alternative Tourism Activities

The digitalization of alternative tourism owes to the emergence of digital technologies, such as e-marketing/e-commerce applications and internet tools, which comprise an innovative approach to trigger the success of hospitality ventures by providing compelling incentives to enhance and maintain their competitive position and secure future growth [35]. For instance, e-marketing generates interest in digital destinations, implements targeted online advertising, and maintains consistent communication with travelers [35,36]. In a similar vein, e-commerce, referring to any website serving commercial purposes, endorses online promotion, shopping, service, and collaboration [37]. Thus, efficiently designing the e-commerce business model of a corporation is crucial for advanced performance levels [38]. Internet-based tools in the tourism sector include advertising on search engines, social media, online professional catalogs, and banners on other websites that promote similar services; hospitality ventures adopt internet tools to gain a competitive edge. For instance, social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram are frequently used by tourism ventures for designing, promoting, and selling their offerings. According to relevant studies, online reviews shared on social media, blogs, and forums come in second to word-of-mouth advertising for 82% of consumers worldwide.

Digitalization, thus, offers numerous benefits to businesses, but it also requires careful planning and execution [39–42]. Within the last few years, Greece has been actively

pursuing a digital transformation agenda with the overall objective to enhance its competitiveness. However, tourism businesses are still at an adolescent stage regarding the integration of digitalization in their operations, as they are hesitant to rely on such innovative methods in order to promote their products and services. The primary reason is that they are still not aware of the benefits offered by a wide range of digital technologies [43].

2.3. Digital Applications and Tools for Tourism Organizations

According to Zimmerman [44], the stepping stone to introducing a tourism business to the digital marketplace is the creation of an attractive website, which should be communicated via search engine machines. The second important leap is the development and establishment of a recognizable brand name via viral and affiliate marketing. Furthermore, the company must learn how to manage social media by creating accounts, entries, and blogs on all relevant networks, as well as updating them constantly and responding in a timely manner to all questions. In parallel, companies within the industry should effectively use e-mail marketing techniques by purchasing or collecting tourists' e-mail lists in order to promote and sell their offerings and services. To build brand awareness and maintain high audience tracking, digital advertising is the recommended recipe. The company can create or purchase advertisements from other websites that cover the same target market to attract them to its own website. Finally, in order for the tourism venture to complete a successful online presence, it has to develop online booking systems and distribution channels [45]. Next, we report some evidence of applications/tools that are surrounded by digital technologies.

Online advertising: In general, digital advertising is considered trustworthy, though customers typically perform their own research and verify the requested information through multiple sources [46]. In the tourism and hospitality sector in particular, it is considered an important aspect of promotion strategy, as it allows hotels to reach out and connect with potential guests as they spend most of their time digitally [47]. According to Nielsen's study [48] conducted with a sample of 28,000 online consumers from 56 countries, advertising in Google's search engines is trusted by 40% of online consumers on a global scale. This percentage has dramatically increased in recent years, the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) indicates that the index score of customer satisfaction with the search engine Google from 2012 to 2022 has fluctuated between 80 and 77 index points out of 100. In the opposite direction, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in social media as an information source is relatively low, with only 37% of people considering it trustworthy [49]. Cataloging in online professional catalogs and advertising via banners at other websites promoting similar products is trusted by 33% of consumers. Search engine marketing in combination with search engine optimization is adopted by tourism companies because it increases customer visits, thus, providing the company applying it with a competitive advantage [50]. Finally, while an online survey hosted on Instagram in 2024 revealed that 52% of marketers believe video is a tool to build trust between the brand and its customers, video advertising is trusted by a minority of 36% of global travelers. The purpose of an online advertisement is to increase the number of potential tourists that will visit a company's website, thus, becoming actual customers. In this manner, the company's brand name is strengthened and prospective tourists are encouraged to make an online reservation. Finally, online advertising constitutes the most cost-effective promotion with the optimum cost-yield relationship in comparison to any other means. It has the comparative advantage of providing statistical data by using performance measurement tools [40]. More recent studies conducted by various organizations (e.g., Wordmetrics) indicate that 92% of global consumers trust word of mouth as the primary advertising type, which is followed by online reviews, blogs, and forums. In addition, 58% of online consumers show more trust in messages found on the company's website, while in 2024, an equal percentage consider e-mails with advertising content as reliable.

Affiliate marketing: Affiliate marketing is considered to be one of the most effective promotion techniques. It is primarily based on employees who work through the internet

to promote tourism products by directing visitors to the company's website, or to websites that include many different companies associated by their common interest in tourism. It has been proved that the benefits of affiliate marketing techniques have been translated into increased sales volumes and online bookings, and the improvement of the company's product and image promotion [51,52].

Pay-per-click and e-mail promotion: pay-per-click is the most commonly employed approach for the promotion of tourism destinations and sales packages since it presents alluring ads that motivate the visitor to click on the ad, and thus, visit the tourism company's website [51], while, e-mail marketing provides tourism companies with the opportunity of sending promotional e-mails to both native and foreign tourists [53].

Blog marketing usually complements website design. A blog can be incorporated as a mini-site within the main website of the company, where it publishes articles related to the present developments and changes in the tourism sector. The visitors become informed by these publications and they can make their own comments whether positive or negative [54]. Blog marketing constitutes a company–customer communication channel, providing a venture with the opportunity to determine some of the customers' needs, thoughts, perceptions, and reactions [54,55].

Viral marketing is based on word-of-mouth advertising and presents high success outcomes for tourism companies since the issues related to tourism present great interest and are spread with great ease by users [56,57]. Sponsorships give a boost to viral marketing, especially on social media. Companies that wish to become sponsors of a website offer monetary, product, or service donations to this website, expecting in return its advertising via banners and links. Consequently, greater visibility and advertising is achieved. The most common ways tourism companies choose to conduct their sponsorships are via newsgroups, e-zines, sites with a commonality to the sponsor's subject, and online group sessions and forums. Among these, e-zines seem to be exceptional promotion platforms for both native and foreign tourists [57].

Social media: Tourism companies have been pioneers in realizing the need to use e-marketing tools to design, promote, and sell their offerings. Social media platforms in particular, such as Facebook, YouTube, and X (former Twitter) are extensively employed in this direction [58]. 'Facebook' is used by tourism ventures as a tool for promoting and advertising their brand image, products, and/or services. This platform occupies a central role in the digital applications' arbor since tourism destinations, locations, and companies are communicated at a global scale. Tourism agencies use 'YouTube' to advertise holiday packages via the videos they create with the purpose of making the holiday packages they offer more alluring to travelers. Via 'X' (former Twitter), tourism companies can create a loyal audience and establish a company–customer inseparable link. Other emerging platforms include 'LinkedIn', which facilitates the recruitment of specialized and appropriate personnel and promotes the company image via suggestions. 'Instagram' and 'TikTok' are the most influential social platforms today that promote traveling and leisure activities, and many tourism companies engage in these platforms sponsoring brand ambassadors who present their traveling experience. Finally, artificial intelligence (AI) tools, through personalized campaigns, the development of visual reality, and the optimization of search engines' rankings offer new opportunities for travelers' engagement [59–61].

To conclude, the evidence recorded indicates that all digital applications have important positive effects on the competition fundamentals of the alternative tourism segment. Online advertising provides real-time adaptations and increases visibility, facilitating hotel ventures to reach a wider audience, while, via affiliate marketing, they can build trust with the customers and reach niche markets with idiosyncratic characteristics [62]. Pay-per-click and e-mail promotion allows for the personalization of customers' experiences, while blog marketing provides valuable information and content that can inspire and inform potential tourists about alternative destinations and personalized experiences. In a parallel vein, viral marketing increases awareness of lesser-known destinations and alternative tourism experiences and boosts hotel ventures' visibility; social media, which according to evidence

recorded [63], is the most widely used medium of digitalization and allows for engaging with niche audiences, real-time interaction, and sharing of user-generated content.

3. Research Design

We test our theoretical predictions on a sample of tourism companies located in Greece that offer alternative tourism activities. Providing the absence of an official, all-encompassing listing of alternative tourism ventures in the local context, we draw our sampling frame through an extensive internet search. In particular, we searched using Google for the keywords: “*alternative tourism in Greece*”, “*alternative tourism hotels in Greece*”, “*alternative tourism travel agencies in Greece*”, “*alternative tourism tour operators in Greece*”, “*religious tourism in Greece*”, “*ecotourism in Greece*”, “*agrotourism in Greece*”, “*wellness tourism in Greece*”, “*cultural tourism in Greece*”, “*sports tourism in Greece*”, and “*conference tourism in Greece*”. In total, 250 relevant websites of alternative-related tourism companies have been retrieved through this procedure. We have contacted all these firms via phone in order to detail the purpose and objectives of our survey, ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and request their participation. After three rounds of communication, 140 hotels (56%) agreed to participate in the research; a response rate which is considered perfectly satisfactory for similar type surveys. We tested for response bias by comparing early and late responses. The *t*-tests revealed no significant difference between these two sub-groups. For all these companies, alternative tourism consists of an exclusive (25.7%), core (32.4%), or supplementary activity (41.9%) to their operations. From our sample characteristics, we record that more established hotels (i.e., companies active for more years in the tourism industry) include alternative tourism activities as an addition to their mainstream tourism services and products, while new entrants in the tourism market focus exclusively on alternative tourism activities as a way to ground their competitiveness and generate growth. Most businesses operating in alternative tourism offer cultural tourism services (21%), followed by agrotourism (18%), wellness (16%), ecotourism (15%), conference (12%), and religious tourism (11%). The prominence of cultural tourism can be explained if one considers that Greece has a strong cultural background (archaeological, Byzantine, classical or modern monuments, history, arts, folklore, and so forth) that certainly attracts many foreign and local tourists. Agrotourism aims to capitalize on the country’s agricultural tradition, while wellness tourism indicates that the country has invested in rejuvenating infrastructure in order to offer holistic experiences to travelers.

With respect to the years of operation, most of our responding firms (42.8%, 60 respondents) have operated for between 35 and 44 years, 22% between 25 and 34 years, and 21% for more than 45 years. Finally, a minor 14.2% have operated for less than 25 years. The majority of the participant companies have been active in alternative tourism activities for 6–10 years (44%), whereas only 22% of them have been active in the alternative tourism industry for more than 11 years. This is quite expected providing that Greece has a long tradition as a mainstream tourism destination and is considered a rather new entrant in the field of alternative tourism market space. In this vein, it seems that companies have decided to include alternative tourism activities within their existing offerings, rather than exclusively focus their competitiveness on these. Most of the respondents (32%) have 11–15 years of experience in the tourism industry, while a minority of 7% have less than 5 years of relevant experience. Considering that 64% of respondents have had experience in the tourism industry for at least 11 years, it can be safely implied that our sample is knowledgeable and consists of informed respondents.

We conducted the survey through an online questionnaire. Respondents were requested to fill in items including company demographics, questions related to the effectiveness of ventures’ advertising strategy, as well as to assess the role of various digital applications and tools in the promotion of their business using a five-scale Likert scale (from not important at all to extremely important). A ‘technical’ roadmap of our research design is presented in the following Figure 1.

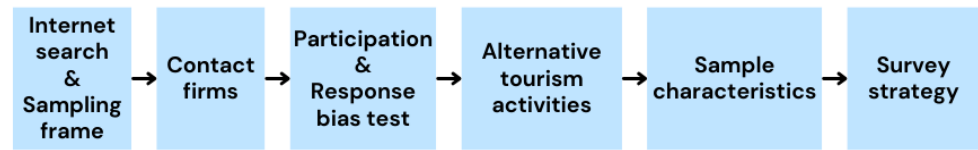


Figure 1. Technical roadmap of research design.

4. Findings

4.1. Traditional Versus Digital Advertising

To assess the difference in the potential success between traditional and digital advertising in the alternative tourism landscape of Greek hotels, we asked our respondents to evaluate the effectiveness of each method. As shown in Figure 2, the least effective way seems to be radio advertising, since a considerable 27% of respondents have assigned a “not at all” or “slight” significance. In the opposite direction, tourist guides and internet advertising have received 68% and 61% of “positive” responses, respectively. We provide an explanation for the prevalence of tourist guides which seems reasonable: ventures dealing with alternative tourism activities consider that tourists who seek these types of experience will prefer to be informed by tourist guides associated with alternative tourism; such guides most often present tourism ventures with a proven quality of services and products.

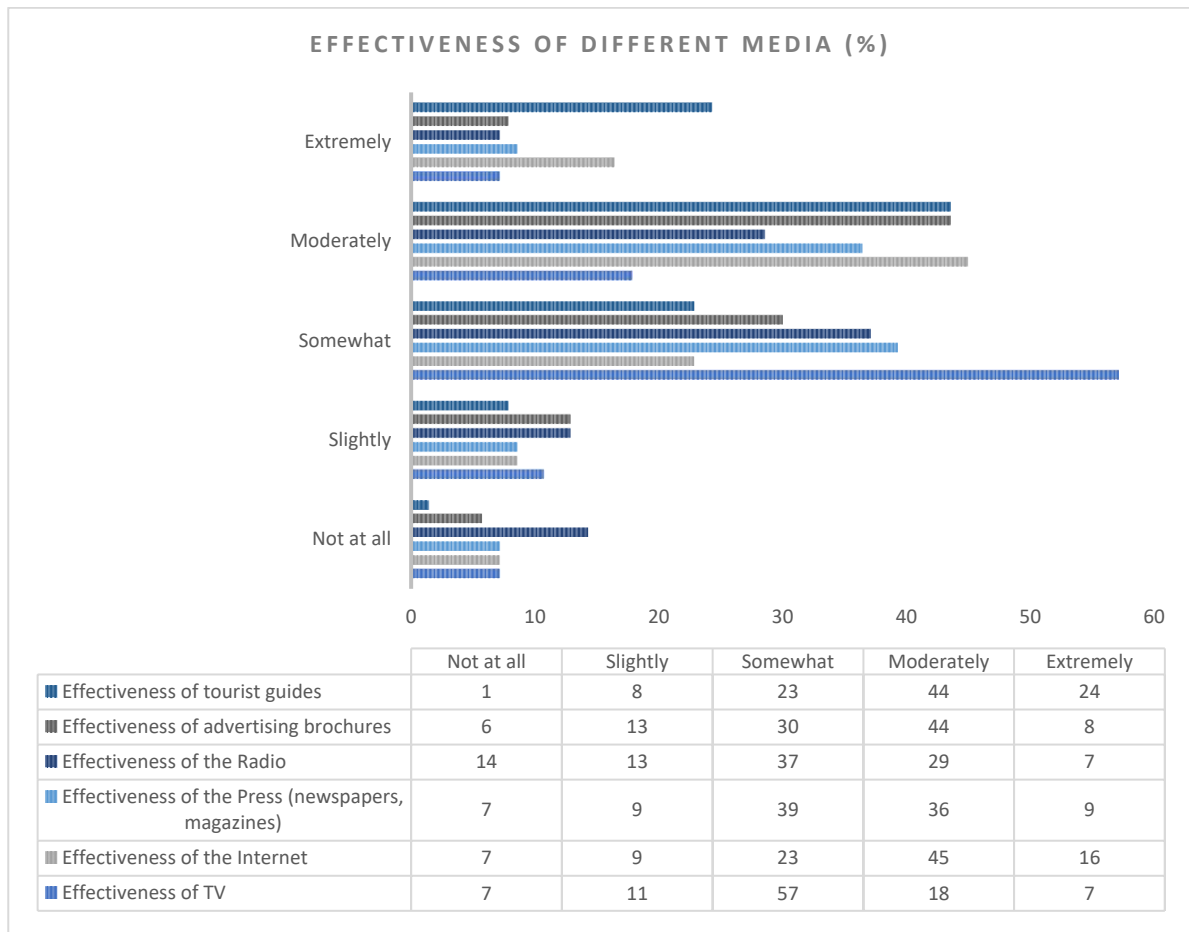


Figure 2. Effectiveness of traditional and digital advertising methods in the alternative tourism market.

As it becomes apparent in Figure 3, the impact of either the internet or tourist guides does not follow a typical pattern based on ventures’ years of operation. Hence, internet and tourist guides’ effectiveness in relation to alternative tourism promotional activities is irrespective of the experience of the firm in the tourism industry.

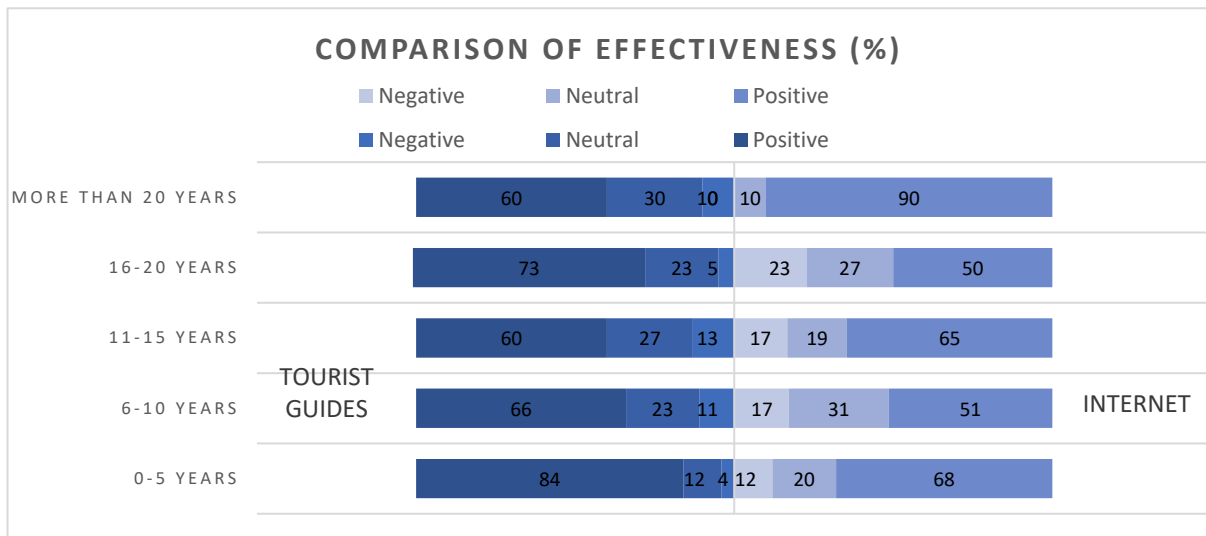


Figure 3. Effectiveness of tourist guides and the internet in the alternative tourism market according to years of a venture’s operations.

Another potentially indicative relationship to be evaluated is whether the perceived effectiveness of the internet and tourist guides depends on the core business scope—alternative or traditional tourism. According to the reported evidence, companies that exclusively focus on alternative tourism seem to consider tourist guides as more effective than the internet (73%); the opposite stands (by a slight difference) for companies not dealing exclusively with alternative tourism (65%). It can then be supposed that a hotel venture having a business portfolio including both traditional and alternative tourism activities is more familiar with the use of a digital ecosystem of promotion.

To gain further insights into the effectiveness of the various promotional strategies in the alternative tourism marketplace, a logistic regression was run with the different means of advertising as our dependent variables. We also controlled for the firm’s years of operation. Bivariate correlations between the dependent variable and all the regressors used in our study are reported in Table 1. We see that the means and standard deviations are reasonable. Such normal dispersal provides an initial legitimization to continue analyzing the data. Respondents reported a mean satisfaction from advertising activities of 3.25 (*std. dev.* = 0.924). Results recorded in Table 2 suggest that among all potential alternatives, internet-based promotion is the only one that has proven to be statistically significant.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics.

	Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Effectiveness (1)	3.25	0.924	2	5	1							
Tourist guides (2)	3.82	1.04	1	5	0.287	1						
Advertising brochures (3)	3.34	1.08	1	5	0.551	0.387	1					
Radio (4)	3.02	1.51	1	5	0.256	−0.029	0.444	1				
Press (5)	3.31	1.19	1	5	0.411	0.157	−0.205	−0.152	1			
Internet (6)	3.54	1.06	1	5	0.258	0.221	0.457	−0.229	0.374	1		
TV (7)	3.07	1.33	1	5	0.058	0.14	0.011	0.457	0.621	−0.152	1	
Venture years of operation (8)	38.25	14.09	1	5	−0.229	0.054	−0.356	−0.594	0.449	0.457	−0.163	1

Table 2. Regression results.

<i>Different Promotion Media</i>	<i>Effectiveness</i>
Constant	1.472 *** (0.382)
Tourist guides	0.177 (0.131)
Advertising brochures	0.060 (0.150)
Radio	0.211 (0.159)
Press	0.015 (0.018)
Internet	0.361 ** (0.152)
TV	0.184 (0.167)
Venture years of operation	−0.141 (0.117)
<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
F statistic	5.75 ***
R square	0.395
Root MSE	1.236

Notes: Figures in parentheses are standard errors. ** significant at 5%, *** statistical at 1%.

4.2. Internet-Based Technologies

Since the significance of internet-based technologies in alternative tourism promotional activities seems undoubtful, an interesting insight for our research purposes derives from our question regarding the most prevalent use of internet-based technologies in order to assess the sophistication and depth of ventures' digitalization. Responses reinforced our assumption that Greek tourism businesses have a long way to go ahead of them. Internet is used for mainly simple tasks, such as information search (18%), contact with partners (17%), and communication with customers (16%). The use of the internet for promotion via website creation stands at relatively low use levels, representing only 11% (see Figure 4).

The source of information that tourists mostly rely upon is another variable of our research focus. Smartphones with search engines were found to be the most commonly employed source for retrieving information (73%), while advice from close contacts reached 71%. Considering that a mobile phone with internet access can be regarded as a subcategory of the internet in general, the internet is recognized as the most important source of information for tourists searching to gather data for their travel. On the other hand, the fact that family and/or friends' recommendations are also highly rated can be explained by the fact that such recommendations constitute a form of word-of-mouth advertising which is a traditional, yet highly effective, medium of promotion. Other available options were phone calls, press, tour operators, tourist guides, and advertising brochures.

Successful technological diffusion and acceptance are primarily determined by the perceived usefulness and ease of use [64,65]. According to Chang [66], the perceived ease of use of tourism mobile applications attracts more attention and also increases the perceived usefulness for users. It is evident from our study that Greek tourism ventures have not yet fully realized the use of the internet as a valuable source of competitive advantage. Conversely, the most important benefit offered by the internet is the reduced advertising cost, followed by direct contact with customers, and promotion on a 24 h basis (see Figure 5).

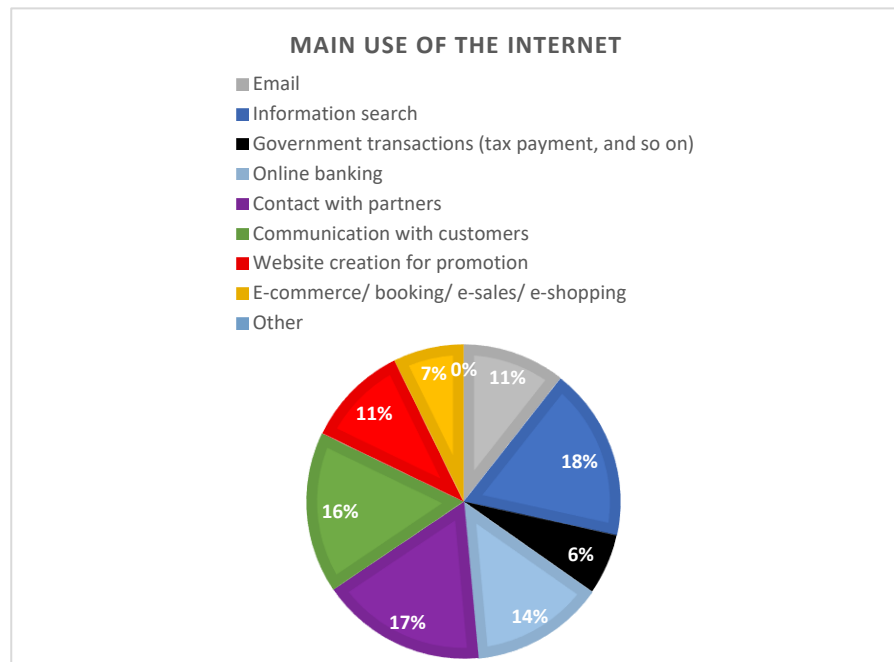


Figure 4. Use of internet-based technologies.

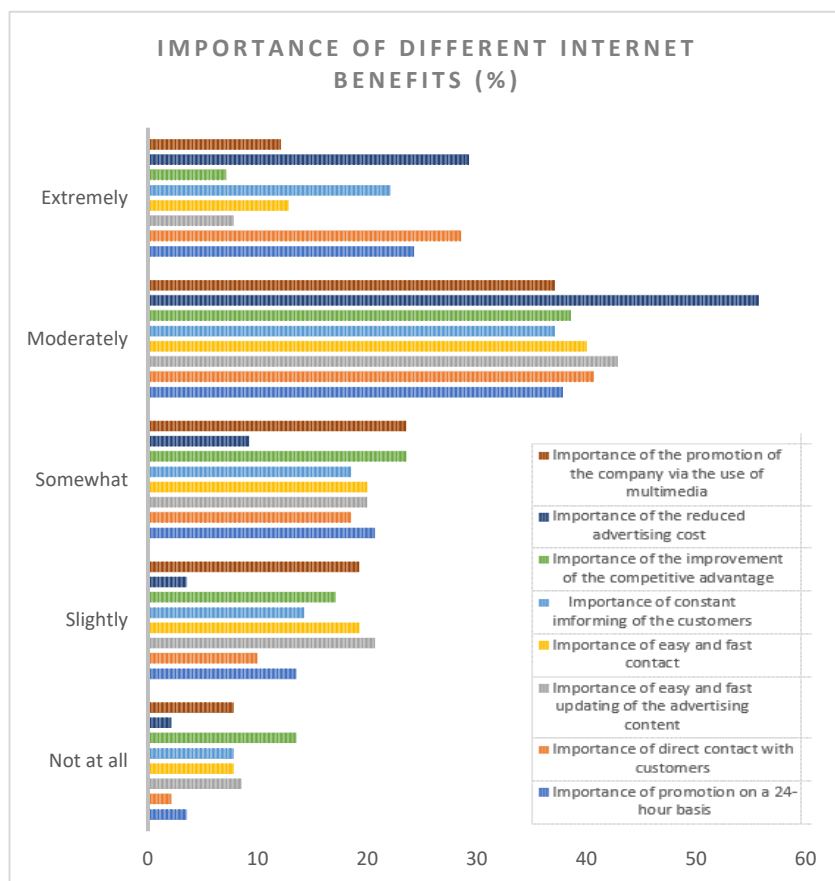


Figure 5. Importance of different internet benefits.

4.3. Social Media and the Contribution of Digitalization Technologies

Regarding the use of social media for promotion and communication, the majority of tourism businesses (33%) use mainly Facebook, followed by those relying on X (formerly

Twitter) (28%). Conversely, the least used social network is LinkedIn (8%), and Google+ (8%). Also, an interesting finding is that a surprising 12% of the sampled ventures stated that their company uses no social networks. The quality of promoting services and products on social networks was also included in our questionnaire. More than two-thirds of respondents assess the acceptance of their online posts from “very good” to “excellent”, while only 12% characterize their presence in social media as “poor”.

Our last research item asked the respondents to evaluate if they believe that e-marketing techniques have a significant contribution to their company’s growth and the attraction of additional customers. A considerable majority (62%) believe that digitalization technologies have contributed to their company’s growth from moderate to extremely significant levels. However, 7% of our responding firms clearly stated that e-marketing does not affect their business growth at all (Figure 6). Figure 6 also reveals that e-marketing contribution to the promotion of alternative tourism activities does not depend on the age of the ventures, since it does not follow a particular increasing or decreasing trend as firms’ years of operation increase.

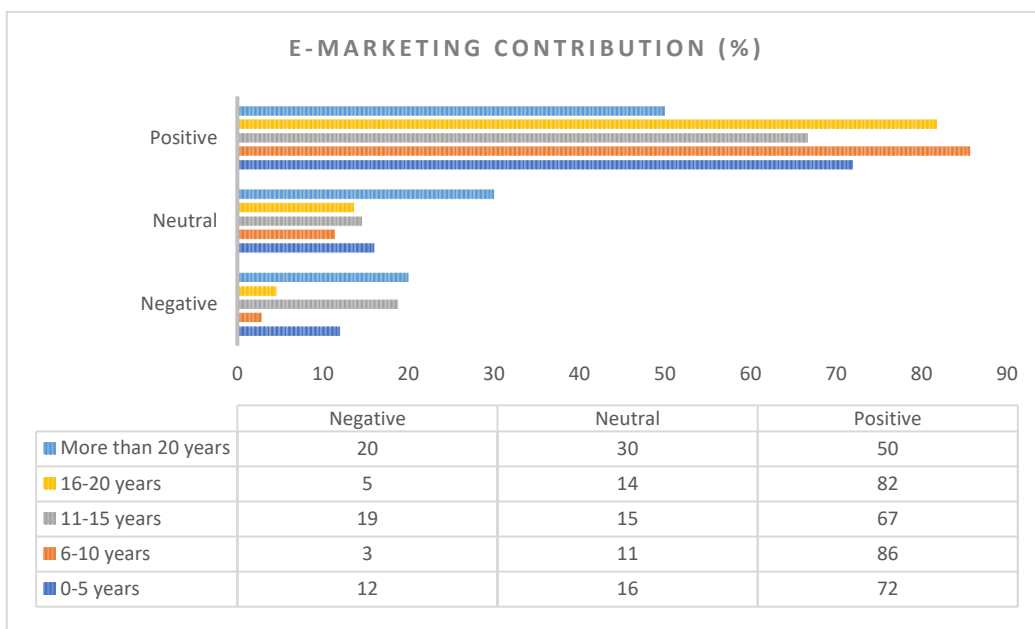


Figure 6. The contribution of e-marketing.

5. Discussion

By adopting alternative tourism activities, while, in parallel leveraging digital technologies, hotel ventures can capture competitiveness and sustainability gains. According to our findings, the majority of tourism businesses in Greece introduce alternative tourism activities in parallel with their mainstream/mass tourism operations. This comes as no surprise; it is logical to assume that with appropriate planning, control, and management, both types of tourism (conventional and alternative) can co-exist, complement each other, and reinforce the competitiveness of hotel ventures. In this vein, we also found that most companies dealing exclusively with alternative tourism are rather “new” in the sector. This could imply a growing interest in unique travel experiences, also reflecting entrepreneurial opportunities in the specific market context.

As far as alternative tourism is concerned, hotel ventures posit that an ideal promotion mix should include both traditional advertising, such as via tourist guides, and internet-based applications. Tourist guides are considered a highly effective way of promotion based on the argument that they are exclusively associated with the specific setting, and constitute in that way a highly specialized source of information for travelers. This is in line with the relevant findings of many scholars [67,68] arguing that tourist guides are key players in

promoting alternative tourism activities as they are the main source of information and interaction between tourists and local communities and provide clues for a personalized experience. Nevertheless, among all potential advertisement media, internet-based technologies seem to be the only statistically significant promotion tool that fuels hotel ventures with efficiency gains. This finding is in accord with the works of many scholars [63,69,70] positing that as information is the lifeblood of the travel industry, effective use of internet solutions is pivotal for marketing and promotion-related activities [71,72] since it offers a rich and dynamic environment for the exchange of information and resources [73]. It is noteworthy, however, that the local hotel ventures do not fully exploit digitalization advantages. While there is evidence to support that the role of digital technologies in tourism entrepreneurship is critical [74,75], since they provide ventures with performance improvements [76,77], local hotel ventures seem to not fully exploit a wide array of advantages these technologies could offer (they just use the internet to perform simple tasks), maybe because they lack awareness and relevant skills, or the perceived complexity of integrating more advanced functions can deter businesses from fully utilizing internet technologies [63]. Overall, we argue that digitalization is important, yet its benefits should be better capitalized by hotel ventures in the alternative tourism segment.

Finally, providing our results, it can be safely argued that hotels in Greece including alternative tourism activity in their operations appreciate the contribution of social media and digitalization technologies to their development and growth objectives. This is mainly witnessed by the fact that a vast majority of all participating companies promote their offerings (tourist services and products) via the internet by sponsoring them on exclusive or not websites, and popular social networks in order to fully exploit the reduced advertising cost, direct contact with customers, and promotion on a 24 h basis, which seems to be highly advantageous attributes.

6. Concluding Remarks, Implications and Limitations

Our study assesses elements of digitalization in the promotional activities of the alternative segment of the tourism marketplace. In so doing, it offers the following contributions: first, it describes the hospitality sector and the technologies that are reshaping tourism via digitalization. Our findings further substantiate the importance of innovation deployment and the way new technologies enhance the development of new products or services in this marketplace. Second, it examines how the hospitality industry allows personalized services and sustainability in order to leverage its competitive strengths. While several scholars have discussed the emergence of digital applications in the tourism sector, these discussions remain quite fragmented, in the sense that they mainly adopt a macro-perspective (i.e., implications for the wide socio-economic context). Here, we approach the topic through a micro-perspective lens, i.e., the hotel ventures. Third, it discusses the alternative tourism context in a country that has not captured the attention of researchers.

Our research findings offer some practical implications for ventures operating in the hospitality and tourism sector: Greek tourism companies, either dealing exclusively or not with alternative tourism, should acknowledge the contribution of digital technologies in the competitiveness and growth of their facilities. Any promotional tool is effective, however, in order to increase sustainability chances, local tourism ventures should always be a step forward in a society where technology and internet evolution progress at a vast speed. In this regard, Greek tourism ventures need to design their identity in the digital marketplace, following a well-crafted marketing plan. By adopting Zimmerman's steps [16], the development of a digital strategic pathway should initiate by defining the online presence, identifying the available channels, determining the online audience, defining the budget, and finally assessing all factors that influence marketing's strategic plan. At this stage, the financial capabilities, the safety issues, and the legislative coverage should be considered, as well as the training and support of human resources. The importance of digitalization poses specific challenges to public policy as well. Since alternative tourism

is associated with multiple benefits in various aspects of the economic and social context, public policies should assist ventures active in this specific marketplace by providing support actions to help them become technologically familiar. Digitalization level can boost infrastructure and skills development, cybersecurity awareness, and sustainable growth; public policy can provide financial incentives to help hotels offset the costs of purchasing new digital technologies, offer tax reductions for hotels that invest in digital transformation projects, and support training programs on using new technologies and managing digital tools relevant to the alternative tourism marketplace. By implementing these support incentives, governments can create an environment that encourages hospitality ventures to embrace digitalization. This will not only benefit the industry itself but also enhance the overall travelers' experience.

The limitations of our research design and implementation should be carefully considered. First, and maybe most importantly, due to inherent data limitations, we did not consider the perceptions of the recipients of alternative tourism services. Thus, researchers are encouraged to study the impact of various promotional tools from the side of the customers/tourists. Next, while there are several digital technologies modeling the effectiveness of promotion here in our econometric specification we focus on the internet at a broad level of generalization. Other more specific measures would provide us with additional insights into the impact of digitalization on the promotion of alternative tourism activities. In addition, our results should be viewed in light of the research method employed, and especially the nature of the sample. Our sample derives from a single respondent and hence it may suffer from common method bias; hence the generalizability of the findings is limited. Similarly, although it is important to investigate the impact of digitalization on a critical market setting of an EU peripheral economy, the single-country context of the study may also be a limitation. Finally, this research is time-bound. Studies investigating dynamic processes, such as the effectiveness of promotion activities, may require longitudinal designs, as a more appropriate research setting.

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