

EMPOWERING ACTIVE TOURISM THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF THE ALBANIAN ACTIVE TOURISM SURVEY: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract. *The development process of the Active Tourism Survey in Albania has gone through several major steps in order to create knowledge on the multitude of features pertinent in different active tourism businesses. This paper presents the methodology of making the survey: needs assessment, content development, and pilot testing and refinement. The survey includes business description, challenges and opportunities, visitor satisfaction, and marketing and promotion strategies. Each component of the survey was designed to capture relevant information that is critical to understanding the dynamics and challenges facing active tourism businesses. Certain rigorous validation procedures have been observed to make the survey reliable, valid, and relevant to stakeholders. The survey data was piloted and validated during the event of the Albanian Tourism Fair in Tirana (February 2024). This fair has provided the main platform for promoting Albania's tourism products at the international level and has supported the goals of sustainable tourism development. Supported by the Ministry of Tourism, more than 100 exhibitors representing different companies, hotels, and travel agencies presented their tourism products. The survey is an important tool in providing strategic decisions, policy making, and industry initiatives for increasing the sustainability and competitiveness of the active tourism industry. This survey provides important insight into the dynamics of the active tourism sector in Albania by capturing key information related to the business description, challenges, visitor satisfaction, and marketing strategies.*

Keywords: 3- active tourism businesses; Albania Tourism Fair; pilot survey; stakeholders.

Introduction

Tourism businesses are among the most important actors in the economic development of urban and rural areas in Albania. This paper provides a broad analysis of the opportunities and challenges facing tourism businesses in both urban and rural areas in Albania. This study is based on survey data from tourism businesses taking part in the Albania Tourism Fair, January 2024, focusing on aspects such as location, number of employees, type of business, operating seasons, potentials for expanding the business, required investments, and satisfaction with digital platforms. Tourism businesses in Albania play a very important role in attracting visitors, promoting cultural heritage, and creating a better experience for tourists. However, these businesses are facing different challenges and opportunities affected by factors such as location, seasonality, and market demand. This paper tries to analyse the dynamics of tourism enterprises in the urban and rural settings of Tirana and shed some light on their operation, challenges, and future potential.

This study updates the information on the current state of tourism businesses in Albania and those ways through which their competitiveness and sustainability may be enhanced. Tourism is one of the highest contributors in the economy of Albania concerning the creation of jobs, income generation, and infrastructure improvement.

Literature Review

The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance-II IPA II is the framework for EU support to Albania in the area of tourism-led local economic development, aiming to strengthen local economies with sustainable tourism practices. 2014-2020 IPA II.

The European market potential for sports tourism, as analysed by CBI, highlights the growing demand for sports tourism in Europe and identifies key opportunities for market development (CBI, 2023).

The importance of stakeholder involvement in sustainable tourism development in Albania, presenting a framework for collaborative efforts among various stakeholders to promote sustainable practices is presented by (Brokaj & Murati, 2014). Ciro (2019) evaluates the policy framework governing tourism in Albania, offering an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of current policies and suggesting improvements for better governance. The challenges and opportunities related to sustainable tourism in the national parks in Albania, focusing on nature-based tourism and its potential for regional development are discussed by (Rantasa et al., 2019).

ICT has changed the way tourists plan and experience recreational activities. According to Buhalis and Law (2013), ICT allows leisure tourism operators to provide personalized services to their customers, therefore increasing satisfaction. Most importantly, social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are playing major roles in the promotion of recreational tourism. Tourists share experiences, which attracts more visitors to the recreation destination.

The integration of ICT in active tourism has similarly revolutionized the industry. ICT helps to promote and increase the reach of active tourism activities, thus increasing tourists' participation in such activities. Location-based technologies enhance safety by enabling operators to monitor tourist movements and respond to emergencies .

However, there are still some challenges to face in maintaining uniqueness, consistent investment in the technology infrastructure, and the data privacy and security issues of tourism products. The tourism industry always requires new investments and innovation in order to maintain its competitiveness and attractiveness.

Digital marketing and social media are very important for the recreation and active tourism industry. They allow businesses to reach a larger possible market, engage them in real time, and build better relationships with customers (Buhalis & Law, 2013; Koo et al., 2018).

According to Gretzel et al. (2023), smart tourism technologies can enhance resource management, visitor experience, visitor engagement and strategic decision-making. The foregoing are in line with the developments in Albania within the modernization of its tourism industry with digital solutions as indicated by (El Archi et al. 2023; Bota-Avram 2023).

Thus, perceptions of authenticity create a state of adequacy in the development of tourist satisfaction (Remoaldo & Ribeiro, 2022). Lee et al. (2020) illustrate how cultural worldviews drive decision-making processes for tourists in heritage tourism, something so fundamental to the rich cultural destinations of Albania. The work of Benhaida et al. (2024) enhanced the concept of creative tourism with an emphasis on experiential and participatory dimensions that could give greater weight to tourism products.

Akdemir et al. (2023) support the need for empirical research as sources of data that could underpin policy design in tourism, while Chang (2022) has presented some frameworks through which immersive tourism experiences could be created.

Jiménez-García et al. (2020) conducted research on sports tourism that has identified the potential of such tourism for stimulating sustainability – a particularly relevant context that can apply to the active tourism sector in Albania.

Digital transformation of the businesses operating in the tourism sector is considered the most efficient in transforming the sector into sustainable development by "improving visitor experiences, managing destinations more effectively, and guiding business operations for sustainability" (Rodrigues et al., 2023).

Methodology

This is a survey-based research, whereby data was collected from tourism businesses operating in Albania. The survey tool included questions about the business location - urban or rural, employee numbers in peak and low season, type of business, operating seasons, its expansion potential, necessary investment, and how satisfied they are with the digital platforms. The questionnaire seeks information on business description, challenges, and opportunities, visitor satisfaction as well as marketing and promotion strategies. Each component was designed to capture relevant information, important to understanding the dynamics and challenges of active tourism businesses.

The validation procedures were performed to ensure the survey's reliability, validity, and its relevance to stakeholders. The piloting and the validation of data from this survey was conducted within the Albanian Tourism Fair event, Tirana, 31 January-1 February 2024. This fair will act as the main platform for promoting Albania's tourism products at the international market and while advancing sustainable tourism development objectives. More than 100 exhibitors, consisting of companies, hotels, and travel agencies supported by the Ministry of Tourism, were involved in showcasing their varieties of tourism products. Using random sampling, 41 tourism businesses were distributed with the survey, and responses were collected and analyzed for trends and patterns. This study was conducted using statistical analysis through descriptive statistics and frequency distributions in analyzing the data collected. The collection of data in tourism businesses was done through surveys, whose responses were analyzed using statistical techniques.

Results

Most businesses, 76.5%, are open year-round, hence showing a year-round operation as opposed to being seasonal. The top two types of business structures are sole proprietorship and Limited Liability Companies – each makes up 47.1% of the businesses from which the survey was conducted.

Hotels make up the lion's share of the market at 41.20%. Guesthouses take up a fair amount at 23.50%. Resorts are at 35.30%, proving to be well represented in the field. Most of the active tourism businesses are located in urban areas, with 82.40% in cities and rural locations making up 17.60%, which, although smaller, is still a very important sector. A staggering 94.1% of the

businesses reported having the potential to grow into other seasons, hence showing opportunities in expansion and diversification.

Figure 1 shows the benefits of operating in a specific region, and each benefit is mentioned with its respective percentage according to the business perceptions. The proximity to the tourist attraction seems to be the most important benefit and has been voted by 58% of the respondents.

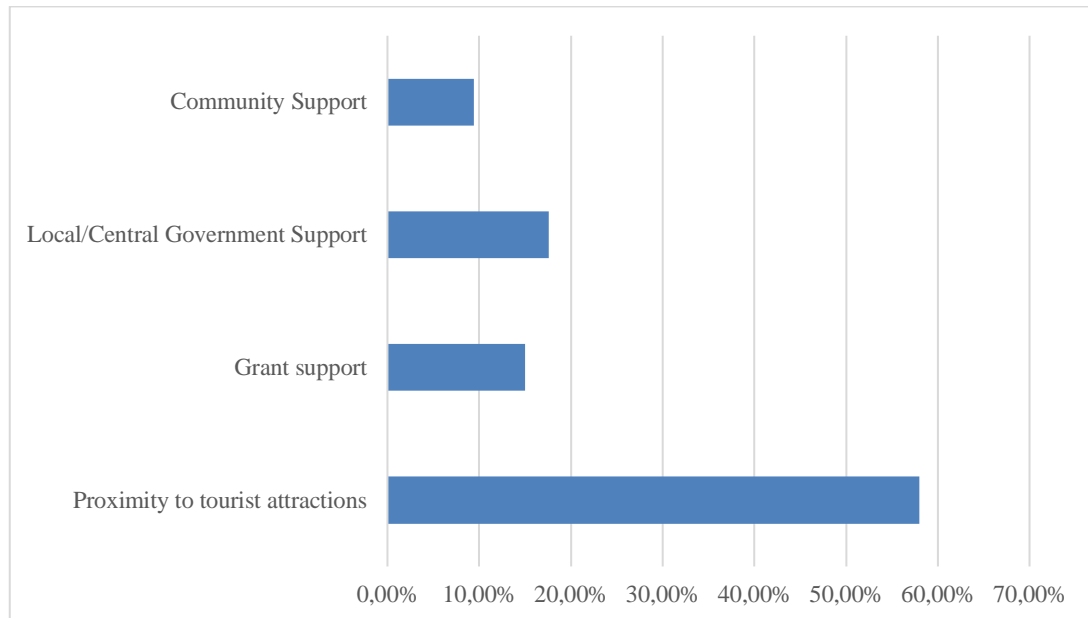


Figure 1. Advantages of operating in a particular area

Operational Challenges and Quality of Services

There are also various operational challenges, which include infrastructure issues, seasonality of tourism demand, difficulties in finding qualified staff, and the need for better cooperation between tour operators and local government entities. The quality of accommodation and guided tours has been rated highly by businesses. Online marketing efforts and availability of activities have, however, received mixed reviews. The majority of the attractive forces were identified as cultural heritage tours and recreational activities for these businesses.

Expanding companies are faced with various investment options, each with its potential rewards and challenges. Most notably, in the present scenario, strategic investments are the driving force behind business expansion and one way forward toward continued growth. Resource allocation to primary investment categories such as digital marketing, infrastructure, digitalization, governmental support, capacity expansion, and engagement of youth, as proposed by the framework here, will add competitiveness, adaptability, and resilience to deal with an everchanging market environment (Figure 2).

- Digital Marketing (32.90%): With increased online platforms and digitalization of customer interaction, investment in website and social media digital marketing channels is definitely a path that the company has to undertake. The platforms help increase the visibility for its brand, aside from being utilized in the running of targeted marketing campaigns aimed at improving customer loyalty and engagement.

- Infrastructure: 29.40%—The investment in infrastructure, such as physical facilities and technological systems, forms the backbone of operational efficiency and scalability. Strong infrastructure allows companies to meet increasing demands, optimize processes, and be agile in changing market dynamics.
- Digitalization: 17.60%—The companies are implementing measures for their digital transformation to stay competitive in today's digital economy. It invests in digital technologies that facilitate operations, enhance customer experiences, and create new sources of revenue for the future.
- Governmental Promotion Campaigns 12.90%: It can create business-friendly environment with the help of local and central governments in promotion campaigns; this may lead to brand recognition, attracting investment, and igniting the economy in targeted areas.
- Capacity Expansion 4.30%: Increasing production capacities is a prerequisite to meet the growing market demand and capitalize on new market opportunities. Strategic investment in capacity expansion guarantees scalability and resilience, enabling the business to capitalize on emerging trends.
- Youth Engagement (2.90%): Building brand loyalty and nurturing future consumer bases involves focused initiatives toward engaging the youth. A great deal of investment in programs and platforms focused on youth will drive not only short-term sales but also long-term customer relationships.

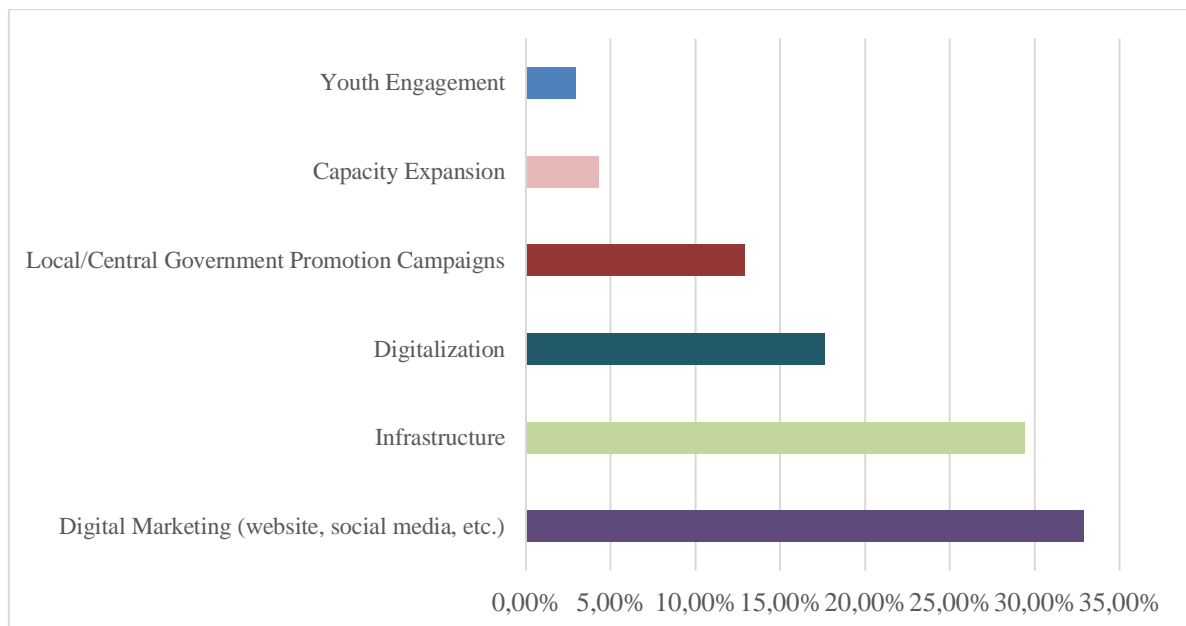


Figure 2. Allocating resources effectively across key investment categories

Over the past three years, most businesses have invested less than 50,000 Euros in IT. The investments have primarily been funded through the businesses' own revenues. As many as 41.2% of the businesses have invested between 20,000 to 50,000 Euros in IT during the past three years and hence fall into a moderately technological adoption category.

Table 1. Addressing the Spectrum of Business Needs for Governmental Support

Type of Support	Observed
Financial Aid	12

Marketing Support	8
Infrastructure Development	10
Training and Capacity Building	6
Regulatory Simplification	5
Total	41

Table 2. Hi-square results for Governmental Support types

<i>Test</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)</i>
<i>Pearson Chi-Square</i>	4.005	4	0.404

The results of the chi-square test statistics indicate that there is no significant difference in the distribution of types of support needed by the businesses, meaning there is a relatively even need for different types of government support.

Satisfaction with e-Albania Portal

The e-Albania portal offers real-time online services for tourism businesses, including licensing and permits, to enhance efficiency and regulatory compliance (e-Albania, 2024). Businesses report a high level of satisfaction with the e-Albania portal for their business needs, with most expressing either very satisfied or partially satisfied opinions. Table 3 gives a clear view of the satisfaction levels in the different aspects of the e-Albania portal, pointing out both the strengths and areas for potential improvement.

Table 3. Satisfaction levels across different aspects of the e-Albania portal

<i>Aspect of e- Albania Portal</i>	<i>Very Satisfied</i>	<i>Partially Satisfied</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Partially Dissatisfied</i>	<i>Very Dissatisfied</i>
<i>Overall Satisfaction</i>	45%	40%	10%	4%	1%
<i>Ease of Use</i>	50%	35%	10%	4%	1%
<i>Efficiency and Speed</i>	48%	38%	8%	4%	2%
<i>Availability of Services</i>	42%	40%	12%	4%	2%
<i>Customer Support</i>	38%	40%	14%	6%	2%
<i>Security and Privacy</i>	46%	38%	10%	4%	2%

Discussion

Most businesses run all year, which showed there was little seasonal downtime, hence proving a continuous involvement in business activities throughout the year rather than seasonal operations. An overwhelming majority of the businesses have potential for filling other seasons, which means many opportunities exist to expand and diversify their business beyond their current timelines. There are several operational challenges in this business, such as infrastructure problems, the seasonal nature of tourism, staff quality issues, and the need for closer cooperation with tour operators and local government units. In general, businesses offering accommodation and guided tours had positive ratings, but their online marketing and

provision for activities were mixed, indicating ways to further improve. Cultural heritage tours and recreational activities are the main drives for visitor attractions and are considered major factors that attract visitors to the respective businesses. The results portray the complexities of tourism businesses and patterns of differences that exist between the rural and urban setting. While there is a greater concentration of tourism enterprises in the rural areas, there may also be special challenges and opportunities in the urban setting. IT investment becomes the most important area for increasing operational efficiency and competitiveness, though the challenges in areas like infrastructure and staffing continue to prevail.

The satisfaction levels about digital platforms emphasize their role in facilitating business operations and in accessing potential customers. ICT integration in recreation and active tourism raises the quality of services, level of customer satisfaction, and efficiency in operations. Personalized services, safety, and destination marketing have been some of the major areas that are affected by ICT. Other challenges that need to be addressed for the full exploitation of the potential of ICT are digital inequalities, data privacy, sustainability, and high costs associated with them. The major problems identified here are of infrastructure challenges, seasonal tourism fluctuations, and the inability of businesses to find qualified personnel. Generally, despite these challenges, businesses showed satisfactory levels of digital platforms where a larger proportion showed partial or high satisfaction rates.

Conclusion

The present research offers some useful information about the features and problems of the active tourism business in both rural and urban areas of Albania. The study is a case study of tourism businesses operating in rural and urban areas in Albania, regarding some specific aspects: location and operating characteristics, investment patterns, challenges faced, and levels of satisfaction with digital platforms. The survey also sought information from the tourism enterprises operating in both rural and urban settings on location, number of employees, months of operation, and potential expansion under way; problems encountered; IT investment; sources of funding; and level of satisfaction with digital platforms. This will provide useful insights for policymakers and stakeholders to design targeted interventions in support of sustainable development in tourism. Future research could use longitudinal trends in order to better capture specific aspects such as digital marketing strategies and workforce development in the tourism sector.

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