



13-14 November 2025

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND SMART PROMOTION IN RURAL TOURISM OF WESTERN ROMANIA

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Abstract: The digital transformation of rural tourism has become an essential element for regional competitiveness and sustainable development. This paper analyzes the impact of digital tools and smart promotion strategies on the visibility of rural destinations in Western Romania. The study was based on an online questionnaire distributed to 96 respondents from Romania and other European countries, aiming to identify how tourists use digital platforms when choosing rural destinations. Results show that most tourists rely on social media, booking platforms, and Google reviews for decision-making. Although Western Romania possesses significant natural and cultural resources, respondents consider that its online promotion remains insufficient. The paper emphasizes the importance of social media engagement, online reviews, and high-quality visual content as effective tools for improving destination image and attracting younger audiences.

•Introduction

Rural tourism has become an essential driver of Romania's local development, stimulating entrepreneurship and preserving cultural heritage. In recent years, technological progress and widespread internet use have reshaped how tourists search, evaluate, and book rural destinations.

Digital transformation supports rural areas in overcoming their visibility and accessibility constraints. According to the National Strategy for Tourism Development 2023–2035, integrating online tools into tourism promotion is a priority for regional competitiveness.

Social media platforms, booking websites, and search engines such as Google have become decisive for destination image formation.

Western Romania, covering the counties of Timiș, Arad, Caraș-Severin, and Hunedoara, possesses exceptional tourism potential but faces weak online representation. Local entrepreneurs often lack digital marketing knowledge, and institutional promotion remains fragmented.

This paper aims to identify how digital tools and smart promotion practices can strengthen the online presence of rural tourism in Western Romania. The research contributes to understanding tourist preferences and proposing applicable measures for regional stakeholders.

•Material and method

The study was conducted between September and October 2025 using an online questionnaire distributed via social media and e-mail. The form included 13 closed questions concerning demographics, travel habits, and perceptions of online promotion.

A total of **96 valid responses** were collected. The sample comprised **87% aged 18–34**, and represented **Romania (64%)**, **other EU countries (17%)**, **non-EU Europe (6%)**, and **outside Europe (14%)**.

Data were processed descriptively in Microsoft Excel. Average scores and frequency distributions were calculated to identify key behavioral patterns, in line with approaches used in previous LSMA tourism studies [1,8].

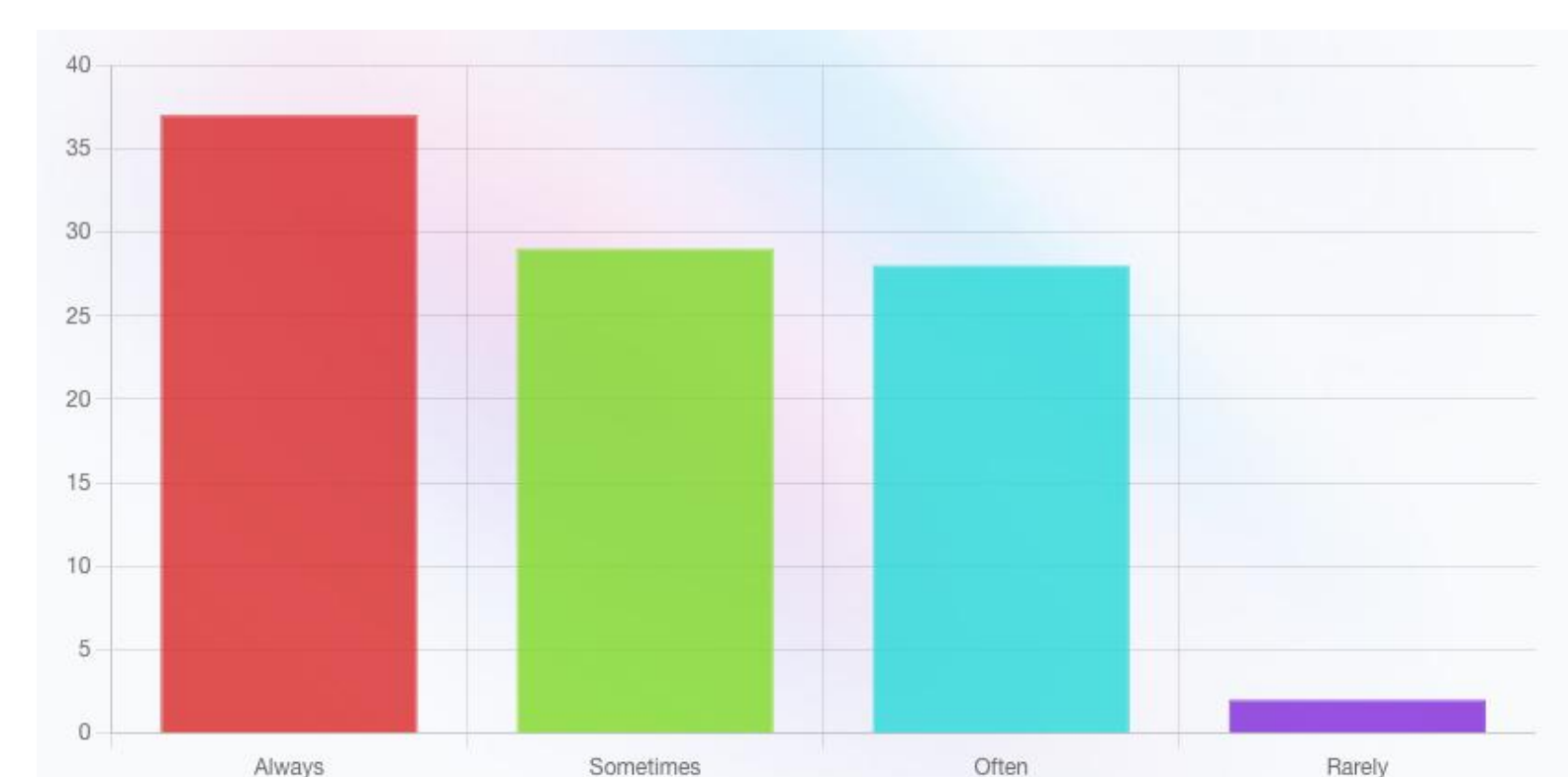
Conclusions

The analysis confirms that digital transformation is central to rural tourism competitiveness in Western Romania. Tourists rely primarily on digital channels, and online reputation directly influences travel choices. Despite growing interest in authentic rural experiences, the online promotion of Western Romanian destinations remains insufficient. Collaboration between public institutions, NGOs, and local entrepreneurs is required to: enhance social media visibility through professional content and influencer partnerships; improve Google presence and encourage user-generated reviews; offer online booking options for guesthouses and rural attractions; develop digital skills through AFIR and ADR training programs. Smart promotion is therefore not merely a communication tool but a vital component of sustainable regional development in the digital age.

• Research Results

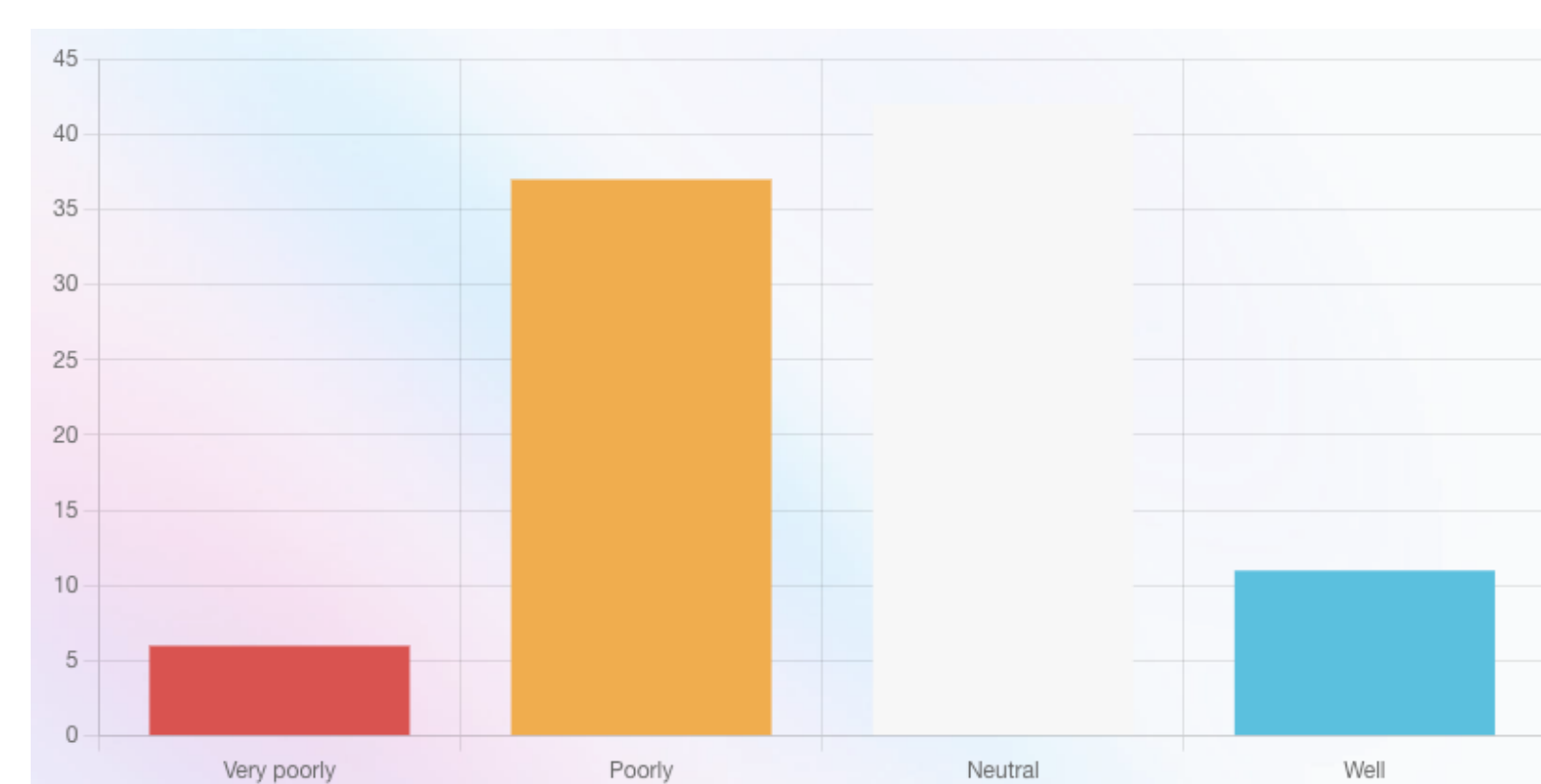
Profile of Respondents: Among 96 participants, 90% had visited rural areas for tourism and 95% had traveled to rural destinations in Romania, indicating strong familiarity and interest in rural tourism. Age distribution showed that most respondents were 18–34 years old, predominantly from Romania and other EU countries.

Use of Digital Tools: About 70% of respondents reported using digital tools sometimes or always when planning rural trips. Google Search, Booking.com, and social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) were the most used platforms, reflecting broader European digital trends.



Importance of Online Factors: Tourists rated factors influencing destination choice, with authentic local experiences scoring highest (4.2/5), followed by price and accessibility (3.9), and online visibility (3.8). Authenticity remains the main motivation, but online visibility increasingly affects competitiveness.

Awareness and Perception of Western Romania: 98% of respondents were aware of rural destinations in Western Romania, yet 90% considered their online promotion poor or moderate, highlighting low digital integration. Coordinated local strategies could improve visibility.



Digital Tools and Preferred Content: Social media pages (66%) were seen as the most effective promotion tool, followed by influencer collaborations (19%) and Google Maps/Reviews (14%). Preferred content included photos and short videos (71%), visitor reviews (22%), and gastronomy/traditions (8%), emphasizing the importance of visual storytelling for attracting tourists.