

# THE CONTRIBUTION OF DIGITAL APPLICATIONS AND INNOVATIVE URBAN EXPLORATION PLATFORMS IN PROMOTING TOURIST DESTINATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**Abstract:** *The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the entire hospitality industry, the crisis triggered by it having implications for each tourist destination. The activity of all tourism operators was deeply affected, and the specialists are reserved about the chances of a strong return of the tourism sector for the next period. The hospitality services are undergoing a profound change, at least from an operational point of view, and the challenges imposed by the current context represent a test stone for the management of tourist destinations. Beside the recovery solutions from the crisis as the various state aid grants for the HoReCa operators whose activity was affected in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, resources to survive and even increase competitiveness on the tourism market that must be the concern of destination management are the innovative approaches of destination marketing and promotion. This paper presents some digital applications and innovative promotion platforms, designed to stimulate tourism and reinvent the way in which the customers interact with their travel experiences.*

**Key words:** tourist destination management, tourist destination promotion, tourist destination competitiveness, digital urban exploration platforms and applications, COVID-19 pandemic.

**JEL Classification Codes:** Z320, Z300, O140.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourist destination management is a topic of great importance as the tourist destinations are in constant competition to ensure the quality of travel experience and to attract both tourists and investors. In order to compete effectively, tourist destinations must offer tourists great experiences and excellent comfort. In addition, *an effective strategy of promoting tourist destinations* is a certain premise of competitiveness.

The organization of tourism activities tends now towards decentralization, the stakeholders are increasingly involved in tourism policy and tourism development, while the concerns about *competitiveness* have become some major objectives of the national tourism agencies and strategic objectives of the regional tourism organizations. Tourist destinations are increasingly facing social, cultural, economic and environmental challenges. The current pandemic context has profoundly affected the activity of all tourism operators, regardless of the tourist destination they operate, so that the innovative promotion solutions can be approached ways to survive and even increase competitiveness on the tourism market. Anticipating this reality, some innovative start-ups have already proposed to the market some digital applications and innovative promotion platforms, designed to stimulate tourism and reinvent the way in which customers interact with their travel experiences.



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## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

*Destination management* represents the coordinated management of all the elements that make up a tourist destination - attractions, facilities, accessibility, marketing and prices. Destination decision-makers need to set clear goals and understand the trends and current situation on a market, identifying the most appropriate perspectives and options for its development, recognizing in time the constraints, challenges and obstacles and trying to take the most appropriate corrective actions in advance. The legislative, organizational and administrative measures are the institutional support needed for tourism activities, but destination planning and management are the keys to a sustainable tourism.

In order to compete effectively, tourist destinations must offer tourists great experiences and excellent comfort. From a marketing perspective, a tourist destination is more than just a geographical location; it is a combination of natural and anthropic tourist resources, tourist products and services and information, able to attract a certain number of tourists. Keller (2000) argues that tourists perceive a destination as a whole, the package of services being impossible to separate from the geographical location and concludes that the tourist destination and the tourist product are identical.

The tourist destination seen as a tourist product is based on the consumer and the tourism providers. The result of tourists' experience in a destination conditions the final perception of it, in terms of its limits and qualities. The different motivations, needs, expectations and experiences that the tourist demand expresses, lead to the identification of a wide range of perceptions of a tourist destination. Therefore, a tourist destination can be defined as *a collection of experiences gained by the tourist*. A successful management of a tourist destination is based on considering this reality in organizing the entire activity and in drafting the strategy of promoting the respective tourist destination.

The transition from destination as a "*tourist place*" to a destination as a "*tourist product*" or, rather, as a system of tourism products depends on the perception of the stakeholders or "actors" involved. Current and potential tourists, public administration, private entrepreneurs, non-local tourism activities and the host community generate a multitude of objectives and needs and implicitly a multitude of facets of the concept of tourist destination. In the Romanian legislation, the concept of tourist destination has been defined relatively recently (Government Order no. 15 from 2017) as follows: "*an area with a variety of tourist products, having a unitary and coherent marketing image and a network of general and specific services contributing in tourist product making*".

Tourist destinations are increasingly facing social, cultural, economic and environmental challenges. The competitiveness of tourism is closely linked to its sustainability, as the quality of tourist destinations is strongly influenced by the natural and cultural environment and the attitude of local communities (<https://www.trendshrb.ro>). In addition, the pandemic context generated by the new coronavirus has profoundly affected the activity of all tourism operators in each tourist destination.

The current crisis caused by the new coronavirus is not the first of its kind in the history of the hospitality and tourism industry, but according to many studies (Yang, 2021), none of the past pandemics have had such severe effects. Regarding the impact of the pandemic on the business environment, the hospitality industry is considered one of the most affected sectors of the economy (UNWTO, 2021 – a). The COVID-19 pandemic "*sent*" unexpectedly the hospitality industry 10 years ago, triggering an unprecedented economic crisis, with major blocking measures, very strict travel restrictions and bans still affecting many people, the activity of all tourism operators being deeply affected (Mihai, Toma, 2020).

The hospitality services are undergoing a profound change (at least from an operational point of view) in the context of the new health standards set by the World Health Organization. Many of the hotel services will be digitized and the travel agencies will face a decrease of tourism demand, their turnover, in the short and medium term (Țigu, 2020).

The specialists are quite reserved about the chances of a strong recovery of the tourism sector for the next period, considering that it will take several years to return to the level before the crisis period (UNWTO, 2021 – b).

In this context, the Romanian entrepreneurs and managers are increasingly concerned about the ability to pay and the risk of insolvency for all current customers and suppliers, but also for those they prospect.

It is difficult to estimate the evolution of economic activity both globally and regionally. Will the virus be eradicated and how will the states react otherwise? The recovery of the economy will also depend on the measures that governments take. The fate of tourism has become a major concern during this pandemic ([www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)).

UNWTO and other relevant organizations (WWTC, EC) as well as governments have been continuously involved in supporting tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying measures to help national organizations, promoting good practices for businesses, entrepreneurs and SMEs, communities, tourism employees and tourists: sustainable development, digitalization, non-discrimination, employment equity, respect for tourism employees' rights, tourists and local communities ([www.wttc.org](http://www.wttc.org)).

In addition to these solutions designed by the authorities to recover from the crisis, a solution for survival and even increase the competitiveness on the tourism market that tourist destination management must be concerned with is **the innovative approaches in destination marketing and promotion.**

Often associated with technical progress, *innovation* is the driving engine behind the development of any society. Innovation is not limited to the creation of new products and technologies (technical innovation), but may have many forms of manifestation, both within organizations and society. It can be about innovation processes aimed at introducing modern methods in the organizational management or in various functional areas (marketing, human resources, logistics, etc.), relatively new concepts in society, such as social responsibility, sustainable development, social needs, social innovation, etc., whose effect is found in increasing the competitiveness of organizations and quality of life.

The *marketing innovation*, consisting in implementing new marketing concepts or strategies differs significantly from the previous marketing methods used and has the following goals: the increase or maintaining the conquered market share; introducing products for new categories of customers; introducing new products on certain geographic markets etc.

The successful marketing innovations consider the customers' latest identified needs and requirements and are aimed at opening new markets or positioning the new product in the best possible market, with the intention of increasing sales. Marketing innovations can be linked to all components of the marketing mix (the four P's - product, price, promotion, placement or distribution), and can be found in pricing strategies, product or service properties or design, packaging features, and packaging arrangements, placing products at the point of sale and promotional activities.

Nowadays, any innovative company must also consider innovation in **product promotion**, using *new forms of advertising*, especially in social media, or *new product promotion techniques*. This approach is also perfectly applicable in tourist destination management, constituting a certain premise to increase competitiveness within the approached tourist market.

This paper presents some digital applications and innovative promotion platforms designed to stimulate tourism and reinvent the way customers interact with their travel experiences. Such innovative digital solutions have already been launched and have proven successful on the market.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Among the successful innovative start-ups that have contributed to the promotion of tourism today, some true examples of good practice in this field the marketing innovation has materialized in, we mention: *Framey* app, *Epicvisits.com* platform, and *Questo* urban exploration app.

► *Framey* proposes an application for travel enthusiasts designed to revolutionize the tourism industry, changing the way users choose a destination, plan their travels and experiences, inspiring them, through images, to go through the whole process of a trip: from *inspiration, planning*, to *personal experience* and then *publishing images* for other users. In fact, *Framey* is a mobile application for iOS and Android, which aims to give its users the option *to create their itineraries based on the images they appreciate in the application*. The *Framey* team wants to inspire travel enthusiasts to use the photos they admire online to turn them into memorable trips. Thus, the application aims to help users make travel plans, find interesting places to visit near them, take unique pictures and share beautiful moments with other users.

In *Framey* app, the users will have all the tools they need to plan a new travel itinerary. Using *Framey* app, people will be able to find the exact places where they can take beautiful pictures when traveling, the company's mission being to *"guide users through some of the most beautiful lesser-known places"*, while giving them a new perspective for the well-known attractions" (<https://www.framey.io/>).

The initiators of the project believe that *Framey* has the potential to reinvent the way we interact with travel and social media experiences. For the first time, travel diaries are made in-app with a simple scroll on mobile phone screens, instead of countless hours of online research. They focus on the impact of images, believing that they inspire people to discover and visit new places around the world.

► The *Epicvisits.com* platform is considered a *"hybrid combination between a travel agency and an epic-specific booking platform"* (<https://epicvisits.com/>). The innovation consists in offering tourists the possibility to *"personalize their tourist experience"* through an original *"configurator"*, which allows each beneficiary to discover his *"epic factor"* and choose according to it, whether it refers to design, story, view, location, experience, etc.

According to the founders' vision, *Epic Visits* addresses those who need inspiration for memorable journeys and are looking for *"solutions that fit their lifestyle."* The innovative operating principle has been thought of as follows:

- Lists top 10% properties with a so-called "epic factor", which refers to design, story, view, location, experience;
- The service offers tourists the opportunity to customize a trip through a *"Mix and Match"* configurator.

It played an important role in the rise of this start-up. *Epicvisits* started in 2020 as a travel agency that, like any other tour operator, soon faced the problems caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the onset of travel restrictions. *"The epic factor* is the one that ensures a great potential for scaling, while remaining attractive and differentiated", according to the initiators of the project.

► The urban exploration application *Questo* aims to offer city exploration games that allow tourists and locals to discover a city on their own, guided by the mobile application. Players explore cities by solving challenges and riddles in their surroundings, thus "unlocking" new places and their stories. Thus, Questo is an urban exploration platform designed on the basis of "quests". Specifically, the "quest" designates a predefined route, a mission through the city through which the tourist has to complete various tasks, different challenges and, as he solves them and puts the correct answers in the application, he reaches the points on the route and discover stories about those places.

The routes in the application are created by locals or by local partners, tour guides, tour operators, etc. There is a well-developed methodology over time, a platform through which they are trained, they receive instructions on how to choose a topic, how to write it, how to present it. Once the content is ready and validated by the content department, it is put into the application and testing with real users begins. The content is generally in English, but depending on the country, there is content translated into other languages, with 10 languages currently available in the app. Each game has a unique theme and role-playing component, and new games are released every week. They are inspired by historical facts, local legends, books or movies and take players to about 15 different attractions, with an average quest time of two hours. The application causes users to pay attention to what is happening around them, the experience being outside the phone. The phone is just a medium for delivering information, but the travel enthusiast is made to notice things he might otherwise have missed and, in addition, to learn new things about the places he visits.

The business model is shared revenue, each content creator receives a share of the quest sold (about 20%). The price paid by a tourist for a game (*a quest*) depends on the city, ranging from \$ 8 to \$ 20. For this amount, each user can invite 3 more friends, with whom to play and solve quests. In the application there are also some free quests (most often related to certain events or educational quests).

Since the pandemic began, *Questo* has increased the number of cities in which it operates. If at the beginning of 2020 the company operated in 40 cities in Europe, now it is present in over 100 cities on 4 continents, and the number of city exploration games has increased by 150%, half of them being created in partnership with others tourism operators. Globally, the city with the most users is Paris, but by the country, UK ranks first, followed by Germany. For Romania, games have been developed in the application for more than 10 big cities, most of the quests being in Bucharest, followed by Braşov and Cluj. There are thousands of users on certain routes, and the number of people who downloaded the application and played at least one quest (completing at least one route) exceeds 100,000 people (<https://questoapp.com/>). Unlike other operators in the industry, the pandemic has accelerated the growth of the business, with people becoming more attentive to things related to security and more interested in having access to things that allow them to be more flexible.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Experts believe that the solutions to ensure and increase the competitiveness of a tourist destination must include, in addition to modernizing tourist offers, the development of some unique tourism products, individualized on specific markets, increasing the quality of tourist services, qualification and continuous improvement of the workforce, a better collaboration between the participants in the tourist act, the improvement of the public-private partnership, the *improvement of the promotion strategy*. In the current context, this is a priority, a solution to ensure a distinct identity of the offer on the specific market. The examples of digital

applications and innovative tourism promotion platforms discussed in this paper are arguments for the fact that *innovation in marketing and promotion of tourist destinations* has already demonstrated its success in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic.

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