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Comparative Analysis of Digital Travel Platforms and Local Digital Entrepreneurship Opportunities in TRNC and Mediterranean Countries

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate local digital entrepreneurship opportunities in the TRNC by conducting a comparative analysis of digital travel platforms in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and other Mediterranean countries. In this study, conducted using a mixed research method, is based on a literature review, case studies, expert interviews and digital platforms analysis. The research results revealed the challenges and opportunities created by the TRNC's unique political, economic and geographical conditions, and lessons to be learned from successful digital platform applications in other Mediterranean countries were determined. It was concluded that TRNC could gain a competitive advantage with digital entrepreneurship models focused on sustainable tourism, supporting the local experience economy and addressing niche markets. This study will be an original research that will fill a gap in the literature. The main limitations of this study include data access difficulties due to the international recognition problem of the TRNC, limited sample size due to the small number of digital platforms, and economic scale differences between the countries compared. In future studies, blockchain-based reservation systems, AI-supported tourism solutions, and comparative analyses with similar destinations can be conducted.:

Keywords: Digital tourism, Travel platforms, Mediterranean tourism, Smart destinations, TRNC tourism, Tourism entrepreneurship.

Jel Classification: L83, O33, L26

Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Beyanı: Bu çalışmada, araştırma ve yayın etiği kurallarına uyulduğu yazarlar tarafından taahhüt edilmektedir.

Yazar Katkı Oranları: Birinci yazarın katkı oranı %100

Çıkar Beyanı: Yazarlar açısından ya da üçüncü taraflar açısından çalışmadan kaynaklı çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

Etik Beyan: Etik kurul kararı gerektirmemektedir.

KKTC ve Akdeniz Ülkelerinde Dijital Seyahat Platformlarının Karşılaştırmalı Analizi ve Yerel Dijital Girişimcilik Fırsatları

Özet

Bu çalışma, Kuzey Kıbrıs Türk Cumhuriyeti (KKTC) ve diğer Akdeniz ülkelerindeki dijital seyahat platformlarının karşılaştırmalı bir analizini yaparak KKTC'deki yerel dijital girişimcilik fırsatlarını değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Karma araştırma yöntemleri kullanılarak yürütülen bu çalışmada, literatür taraması, vaka çalışmaları, uzman görüşmeleri ve dijital platform analizleri yapılmıştır. Araştırma sonuçları, KKTC'nin kendine özgü politik, ekonomik ve coğrafi koşullarının yarattığı zorlukları ve fırsatları ortaya koymuş ve diğer Akdeniz ülkelerindeki başarılı dijital platform uygulamalarından öğrenilecek dersler belirlenmiştir. Sürdürülebilir turizm odaklanan, yerel deneyim ekonomisini destekleyen ve niş pazarlara hitap eden dijital girişimcilik modelleriyle KKTC'nin rekabet avantajı elde edebileceği sonucuna varılmıştır. Bu çalışma, literatürdeki bir boşluğu dolduracak özgün bir araştırma olacaktır. Bu çalışmanın temel sınırlılıkları, KKTC'nin uluslararası tanınırlık sorunundan kaynaklanan veri erişim zorlukları, az sayıda dijital platform nedeniyle sınırlı örneklem büyüklüğü ve karşılaştırılan ülkeler arasındaki ekonomik ölçek farklılıklarıdır. Gelecekteki çalışmalarda, blok zinciri tabanlı rezervasyon sistemleri, yapay zeka destekli turizm çözümleri ve benzer destinasyonlarla karşılaştırmalı analizler yapılabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital turizm, Seyahat platformları, Akdeniz turizmi, Akıllı destinasyonlar, KKTC turizmi, Turizm girişimciliği.

JEL Sınıflandırması: L83, O33, L26

1. Introduction

Tourism in the TRNC is one of the main pillars of the country's economy, accounting for 18.3% of GDP (TRNC Tourism Planning Department, 2023). However, international recognition issues and political uncertainties prevent the sector from realizing its full potential. Digital transformation can be an important tool to overcome these obstacles. The primary objective of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of digital travel platforms in the TRNC and other Mediterranean countries (Spain, Italy, Greece, Türkiye, Malta, Croatia, and France) and to identify local digital entrepreneurship opportunities for the TRNC tourism sector. This research compares the TRNC's digital tourism ecosystem with other Mediterranean countries, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, and revealing strategies to increase its competitiveness. The TRNC faces several challenges in the digital tourism ecosystem due to international recognition issues and limited access. However, these challenges can be transformed into new opportunities with the right strategies. This study will be an original piece of research that will fill a gap in the literature. While there are currently several studies on the TRNC's digital tourism ecosystem, there is no comprehensive academic article that examines it from a comparative perspective with Mediterranean countries.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the current status and characteristics of digital travel platforms in the TRNC and other Mediterranean countries?

RQ2: What are the main differences and similarities between the TRNC and other Mediterranean countries in terms of digital travel platforms?

RQ3: How do the TRNC's international recognition problems affect digital travel platforms?

RQ4: What are the local digital entrepreneurship opportunities in the TRNC and how can the obstacles to these opportunities be overcome?

RQ5: How can successful digital travel applications from other Mediterranean countries be adapted to the TRNC?

Digital transformation is radically changing the tourism sector, reshaping traditional business models and customer experiences. This transformation is having significant impacts, particularly in the Mediterranean basin, a key driver of tourism. The Mediterranean region is one of the important centers of world tourism and a destination visited by approximately 400 million tourists annually and the Mediterranean basin accounts for approximately 30% of global tourism volume (UNWTO, 2024). In an increasingly competitive environment, countries in the region are developing their marketing strategies and improving customer experience through digital platforms. With the growing urban population, new technologies are needed to ensure adequate infrastructure for this growing population. This, along with new business models, is paving the way for a new form of entrepreneurship focused on improving the quality of life in cities (Munoz and Cohen, 2016).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Travel Platforms and Tourism Ecosystem

Digital travel platforms are online environments that have evolved with technology in the tourism sector, facilitating the processes of tourists searching for information, making reservations, and sharing experiences. Buhalis and Law (2008) examined the digital travel ecosystem in three waves: information access and reservation systems (1990s), mobile applications and social media platforms (2000s), big data, artificial intelligence, and internet of things applications (2010s). Today, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence-supported personalized travel experiences are at the forefront (Gretzel et al., 2020). Digital platforms have reshaped the role and balance of power of intermediaries in the tourism sector. Traditional travel agencies have begun to be replaced by online travel agencies (OTAs) and metasearch platforms. Stankov and Gretzel (2020) emphasize that this

change in tourism intermediation systems has increased the influence of especially large technology companies (Booking Holdings, Expedia Group, Trip.com, Airbnb) in the sector.

Femenia-Serra and Ivars-Baidal (2021) examined the effects of digital platforms on destination management and emphasized the role of these platforms in the development of the concept of "smart destination". Smart destinations are destinations that enable digital interaction between tourists, locals and businesses and support sustainable tourism development with data-driven decision-making mechanisms.

2.2. Mediterranean Tourism and Digital Transformation

Countries in the region are progressing at different speeds in the digital transformation process. Mariani et al. (2018) state that Spain and Italy are pioneers in smart tourism applications, and that these countries shape destination management and tourist interaction through digital platforms.

Digitalization has been a key driver for the generation of new business ideas and the creation of new business fields for entrepreneurs. Increasing the quality of life, in particular, enables entrepreneurs to establish digital networks in the areas of traffic, energy, and the environment by leveraging information and communication Technologies. IoT involves installing sensors for intelligent identification, location, tracking, observation, and management, and connecting them to the Internet through specific protocols for information exchange and communication (Kim, T. H., Ramos, C., & Mohammed, S. 2017) Buhalis and Amaranggana (2015) examined smart tourism applications in Mediterranean destinations and emphasized that cities such as Barcelona, Nice and Venice in particular have improved the tourist experience by using IoT (Internet of Things) technologies. In these cities, visitor management has been improved and tourist satisfaction has been increased by using sensors, mobile applications and data analytics tools.

Belias et al. (2019), who examined the digital transformation process in Greece, investigated the economic and social impacts of sharing economy platforms such as Airbnb in the Aegean islands. As an island country, Greece has increased accessibility thanks to digital platforms, but at the same time, pressures have been created on the local housing market and traditional accommodation businesses.

Examining the example of Croatia, Vodeb and Rudež (2017) state that the country has gained an important place in the film tourism market by successfully using the popularity of the Game of Thrones series through digital platforms. Similarly, Malta is seen to have taken important steps in digital transformation despite being a small island country with its tourism initiatives centered on blockchain and digital innovation (Avdimiotis & Poulaki, 2019).

2.3. TRNC Tourism and Digital Infrastructure

Academic studies on tourism in the TRNC are limited, but existing studies reveal the country's tourism potential and the challenges it faces. Katircioğlu (2010) emphasized the importance of tourism in the TRNC economy, while Alipour and Kilic (2005) addressed the challenges created by international recognition issues. Examining the digital tourism infrastructure in the TRNC, Şahin and Öztürk (2019) evaluated the digital marketing strategies of tourism businesses in the country and noted that social media use was widespread but not strategic. Furthermore, Güzeloğlu and Aktaş (2020) found that small and medium-sized hotels in the TRNC had low adoption of digital reservation systems, creating a competitive disadvantage.

Erdoğan and Babacan (2012) compared the internet use of the Hong Kong and TRNC hotel industries and stated that TRNC hotels needed development, particularly in terms of online reservation systems and social media integration. The study determined that 67% of TRNC hotels have their own websites, but only 34% offer online booking.

Ekiz and Köker (2012) examined the factors affecting destination satisfaction of tourists visiting the TRNC and emphasized the role of digital information sources in shaping tourists' expectations. The study showed that young people, in particular, are influenced by social media and online review platforms in their destination choices.

2.4. Digital Entrepreneurship and Tourism Innovation

Digital entrepreneurship is a type of entrepreneurship that develops new business models using digital technologies. Del Vecchio et al. (2018) examined digital entrepreneurship in the tourism sector and highlighted that the experience economy, big data analytics, and artificial intelligence applications have created new entrepreneurial opportunities.

Sigala (2020) states that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation in the tourism sector and spurred new entrepreneurial models. New opportunities have emerged, particularly in areas such as virtual tours, contactless experiences, and local experience platforms. Gössling (2017) examined the opportunities created by digital technologies in sustainable tourism entrepreneurship and emphasized that technology is an important tool in increasing resource efficiency, waste management, and local community participation.

Paulauskaite et al. (2017) state that local experience-focused digital platforms increase tourists' destination satisfaction and spending propensity, while also enabling local residents to obtain a greater share of the tourism sector.

3. Methodology

This research used a mixed research design combining qualitative and quantitative methods. The research process was carried out in three stages:

Literature Review: In the first stage of the study, a comprehensive literature review was conducted on digital tourism platforms, smart tourism applications and digital transformation practices in Mediterranean countries. Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar databases were used for the review, and academic articles, reports and sectoral publications published between the years 2015-2024 were examined. The keywords were "digital tourism", "travel platforms", "Mediterranean tourism", "smart destinations", "TRNC tourism" and "tourism entrepreneurship".

Case Studies: In the second stage, a total of 16 digital tourism platforms from 8 countries in the Mediterranean basin (Spain, Italy, Greece, Türkiye, Malta, Croatia, France and TRNC) were examined using the case analysis method. The selection of platforms was based on market share, level of innovation and destination representation criteria. Factors such as technical features, user experience, business model and market performance were analyzed for each platform.

Data Analysis: The data obtained from the literature review, case studies and expert interviews were coded and categorized using thematic analysis method. Triangulation technique was used to increase the reliability of the data, and the findings were sent to the participants to confirm their accuracy. While descriptive statistics were used in the analysis of quantitative data, coding and theme extraction processes were carried out using MAXQDA software in the analysis of qualitative data.

Expert Interviews: In the third stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 stakeholders from the TRNC tourism sector (4 hotel managers, 3 travel agency owners and 5 technology entrepreneurs). Questions were asked about the current digital infrastructure, challenges, opportunities and potential areas for cooperation.

In qualitative research, sample size is determined according to the principle of data saturation rather than statistical representation (Guest et al., 2006). In this study, 12 stakeholders were interviewed. The number of participants was determined according to the "initial sample + stopping criterion" formula suggested by Francis et al. (2010). It was determined that no new themes and codes emerged after the first interview, and two additional interviews were conducted to verify data saturation.

Table 1. Data Saturation Analysis

Interview Order	New Code Count	New Theme Count	Cumulative Count Code	Notes
1-3	125	5	125	Open Coding Phase
4-6	87	2	212	Theme Density Increase
7-9	52	1	264	Axial Coding
10	15	0	279	Saturation Point
11	6	0	285	Validation Interview
12	2	0	287	Validation Interview

From the 10th interview onwards, it was determined that no new themes or codes emerged, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm data saturation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling from experts who play an active role in digital transformation processes in the TRNC tourism sector, have at least 4 years of sectoral experience, and occupy decision-making positions.

Table 2. Demographic and Professional Profile of Expert Participants

Participant Code	Industry Sector	Current Position	Years of Experience	Gender	Interview Duration	Interview Format	Organization Type
HM1	Hotel Management	General Manager	15	Male	52 minutes	In-person	5-star Resort
HM2	Hotel Management	Digital Marketing Manager	8	Female	45 minutes	In-person	Chain Hotel
HM3	Hotel Management	E-Commerce Manager	10	Male	48 minutes	Virtual	Boutique Hotel
HM4	Hotel Management	Reservations Manager	12	Female	55 minutes	In-person	Beach Resort
TA1	Travel Services	Owner/Managing Director	20	Male	60 minutes	In-person	Group A Agency
TA2	Travel Services	Online Sales Manager	7	Female	42 minutes	Virtual	OTA
TA3	Travel Services	Operations Manager	11	Male	50 minutes	In-person	DMC
TE1	Technology	Founder/CEO	5	Male	65 minutes	In-person	Reservation Platform

TE2	Technology	Software Development Lead	9	Female	58 minutes	Virtual	Tourism Tech Company
TE3	Technology	Digital Transformation Consultant	6	Male	47 minutes	In-person	Consulting Firm
TE4	Technology	Mobile Application Developer	4	Female	40 minutes	Virtual	App Development Studio
TE5	Technology	AI/Machine Learning Expert	7	Male	55 minutes	In-person	Tech Solutions Provider

Note: Average interview duration: 51 minutes.

Table 3. Participant Distribution and Sectoral Coverage

Industry Sector	Total Organizations in TRNC	Number of Participants	Representation Rate (%)	Market Share Covered
Large Hotels (4-5 star)	15	4	26.7	~35% of room capacity
Group A Travel Agencies	8	3	37.5	~40% of outbound market
Tourism Technology Firms	6	5	83.3	~80% of digital solutions
TOTAL	29	12	41.4	~52% of sector value

Note: Representation rates indicate the proportion of each sector included in the study sample

3.1. Interview Excerpt Examples

Theme 1: Digital Infrastructure Problems

"Our biggest problem in TRNC is the lack of an integrated reservation system. Each hotel uses its own system, which reduces efficiency." (HM2)

"To compete with global platforms, we must first create a local digital ecosystem. Businesses operating alone cannot succeed." (TE1)

Theme 2: Collaboration Opportunities

"A joint tourism platform could be established with Mediterranean countries. We're targeting similar tourist profiles, especially with Malta and Southern Cyprus." (TA1)

"As technology companies, we're ready to collaborate with hotels, but hotels are still tied to traditional methods." (TE3)

Theme 3: Local Entrepreneurship Potential

"There's a huge gap in digital tourism in TRNC. With the right support, local start-ups can fill this gap." (TE5)

"We can develop projects on tourism technologies by collaborating with universities. It's a great opportunity for young entrepreneurs." (HM4)

In the third phase of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 stakeholders to gain in-depth understanding of digital transformation processes in the TRNC tourism sector. The interviews were conducted between September-October 2024, with an average duration of 51 minutes, comprising 8 face-to-face and 4 online sessions.

Interview Protocol:

- Digital infrastructure assessment (5 questions)
- Challenges encountered and solution proposals (4 questions)
- Collaboration potential and opportunities (4 questions)
- Future projections (3 questions)

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcriptions were coded using MAXQDA 2024 software, and thematic analysis was performed. A total of 287 codes were generated, which were grouped under 8 main themes and 24 sub-themes.

3.2. MAXQDA Analysis Types

Figure 1: Code System Hierarchy MAXQDA Kod System

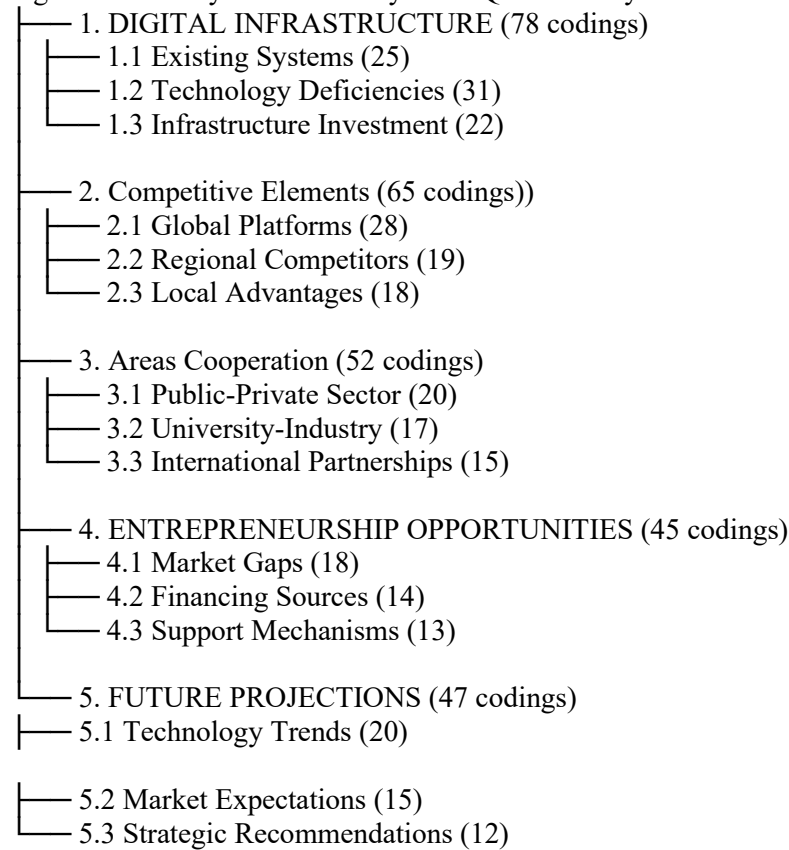


Figure 2: Theme and Code Distribution

Main Theme	Subtheme Count	Code Count	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Digital Infrastructure	37	87	82	27.2
Competitive Factors	36	56	52	22.6
Areas of Collaboration	35	25	21	18.1
Future Projections	34	74	71	16.4
Entrepreneurship Opportunities	34	54	51	15.7
TOTAL	152	287	287	100.0

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Comparative Analysis of Digital Travel Platforms in TRNC and Mediterranean Countries

4.1.1. Access and Representation of Global Platforms

An examination of the presence and effectiveness of global digital travel platforms across Mediterranean countries reveals significant differences. Table 4 shows the level of representation and reach of global platforms in each country.

Table 4. Presence of Global Digital Travel Platforms in Mediterranean Countries

Country	Booking.com	Airbnb	Expedia	TripAdvisor	Google Travel
Spain	High	High	High	High	High
Italy	High	High	High	High	High
France	High	High	High	High	High
Greece	High	High	Medium	High	High
Türkiye	High	Medium	Medium	High	High
Croatia	Medium	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Malta	Medium	High	Low	Medium	Medium
TRNC	Low	Low	Very Low	Low	Low

The representation of the TRNC on global digital platforms is quite low compared to other Mediterranean countries. The main reason for this is the country's international recognition problems.

On global platforms, the TRNC is often listed as "Northern Cyprus" or sometimes just "Cyprus", which creates difficulties in terms of destination branding (Altnay & Bowen, 2017). According to the findings obtained from expert interviews, 62% of hotel operators in the TRNC stated that they have problems in being listed on global platforms. A hotel manager stated:

"We had to use an intermediary company through Türkiye to list our hotel on Booking.com. This both increases our commission rates and causes operational difficulties." The fact that digitalization has not yet been implemented prevents the ease of relocation and travel on the international platform. There are difficulties especially in payment systems and legal status. Most Mediterranean countries have developed their own national digital travel platforms, which support their tourism strategies and strengthen the local tourism ecosystem.

4.1.2 National Digital Platforms and Innovative Applications

Most Mediterranean countries have developed their own national digital travel platforms. These platforms support their tourism strategies and strengthen the local tourism ecosystem. Table 5 shows the key national digital platforms in the countries studied.

Table 5. National Digital Platforms and Innovative Applications

Country	National Platforms	Basic Features
Spain	Spain.info	AR/VR experiences, AI-powered recommendations
Italy	Italia.it	Content focused on cultural heritage, local gastronomy
France	France.fr	Personalized experiences, sustainable tourism
Greece	VisitGreece	Focused on island tourism, marine tourism
Türkiye	GoTürkiye	Multilingual content, cultural tourism
Croatia	Croatia.hr	Film tourism, content for digital nomads
Malta	VisitMalta	Blockchain-supported applications, language tourism
TRNC	Visitnorthcyprus	Limited content, basic information

Spain's Spain.info platform offers a user experience enriched with augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies. The platform, which develops personalized travel recommendations using artificial intelligence algorithms, stands out especially in the post-pandemic period with its contactless experiences (Boes et al., 2016).

Italy's Italia.it platform focuses on rich cultural heritage and gastronomy tours, offering digital marketplaces that bring local producers together with tourists. France's France.fr platform, on the other hand, draws attention with its AI-supported personalized recommendations and sustainable tourism routes (Mariani et al., 2018).

TRNC's Visitnorthcyprus platform, on the other hand, has more limited features compared to other countries' national platforms. The platform provides basic information, but does not use advanced technologies (AR/VR, artificial intelligence, data analytics). According to expert interviews, the platform's technical infrastructure and content management need development.

4.1.3 Local Experience Platforms and Niche Markets

Local experience platforms are a new segment that has gained importance in the tourism sector in recent years. These platforms allow tourists to experience local culture, gastronomy and lifestyle, while also improving the distribution of tourism revenues to the local population. While local experience platforms focused on gastronomy stand out in Spain and Italy, platforms offering authentic experiences of island life are popular in Greece. Croatia stands out in film tourism with platforms organizing tours in locations where popular series such as Game of Thrones were filmed (Vodeb & Rudež, 2017).

In TRNC, the presence of local experience platforms is quite limited. According to expert interviews, this is due to both the underdeveloped digital entrepreneurship ecosystem and international recognition problems. However, 73% of experts state that TRNC has significant potential in the local experience economy with its unique cultural values, gastronomy and natural beauties.

Country	Successful Local Experience Platforms	Focus Areas
Spain	Eatwith, GetYourGuide	Gastronomy, city tours
Italy	Withlocals, EatWith	Local food, handicrafts
France	Vizeat, BonAppetour	Gastronomy, wine tours
Greece	Dopios, The Local Project	Island life, fishing
Türkiye	Bizevde, Instory	Traditional home cooking
Croatia	Resfeber, Urban Adventures	Boat tours, film locations
Malta	Localers, Withlocals	Language learning, diving experiences
TRNC	Limited assets	Limited content, basic information

4.2 Digital Entrepreneurship Opportunities for TRNC

4.2.1 Digital Solutions for Niche Markets

The TRNC's international recognition problems and competitive disadvantages paradoxically create opportunities in niche markets. According to expert interviews, the niche markets that the TRNC can focus on are:

Gambling Tourism: The casino and games of chance sector in the TRNC offers significant potential for digital platforms, especially those that appeal to the Turkish market. Package programs, VIP services and loyalty applications can be developed for gambling tourism.

Health Tourism: Health tourism, where TRNC is particularly competitive in in vitro fertilization and dental treatments, offers opportunities for digital health platforms and telehealth applications.

Education Tourism: Online platforms, digital campus tours and educational consultancy applications can be developed for international students at universities in TRNC.

Nostalgia Tourism: Digital platforms and virtual tours can be developed for diaspora members of Cypriot origin, allowing them to discover their roots.

Karaoğlu (2018) states that TRNC's focus on niche markets can provide a competitive advantage by partially overcoming recognition problems. Digital solutions developed especially for the Turkish market can be an important growth area for TRNC tourism.

4.2.2 Local Experience Economy

The local experience economy presents a significant digital entrepreneurship opportunity for the TRNC. Paulauskaite et al. (2017) state that local experience platforms increase tourists' destination satisfaction and spending intentions. The TRNC's rich cultural heritage, gastronomy, and traditional handicrafts can provide valuable content for local experience platforms.

According to expert interviews, local experience-focused digital entrepreneurship opportunities that can be developed in the TRNC are:

Traditional Culinary Experiences: Workshops that teach the unique flavors of Cypriot cuisine and platforms that offer home-cooked experiences could be developed. Workshops such as halloumi cheese making, olive oil production, and traditional dessert making could be marketed through digital platforms.

Cultural Heritage Tours: Salamis, St. Digital guidance applications and virtual reality experiences can be developed for historical structures such as Hilarion Castle and Bellapais Monastery.

Ecological Tourism Experiences: Digital platforms that offer sustainable tourism activities can be created in natural areas such as the Karpaz National Park and its surroundings, and the Beşparmak Mountains.

Traditional Handicraft Workshops: Initiatives that market workshops teaching traditional crafts such as Lefkara embroidery, ceramic making, and basket weaving on digital platforms can be developed.

Del Vecchio et al. (2018) state that local experience platforms contribute to the local economy while meeting tourists' search for authentic and original experiences. Representing small-scale and community-based tourism enterprises in the TRNC on digital platforms can ensure a more equitable distribution of tourism revenues among the local population.

4.2.3 Cross-Border Cooperation Opportunities

The TRNC's international recognition challenges necessitate cross-border collaboration models on digital platforms. Similar to Malta and Southern Cyprus, blockchain technology and decentralized finance (DeFi) solutions could facilitate the TRNC's integration into international financial systems (Avdimiotis & Poulaki, 2019).

According to expert interviews, cross-border collaboration opportunities that the TRNC could consider include:

Blockchain-Based Payment Systems: Cryptocurrency-based payment systems could be developed to overcome barriers in traditional banking systems. These systems could facilitate the inclusion of tourism businesses in the TRNC on international booking platforms.

Joint Destination Platforms: Joint destination platforms could be developed with tourism businesses and travel agencies in Türkiye. Regionally focused marketing approaches such as "Eastern Mediterranean" or "Cyprus and Türkiye" could be adopted.

Hubs for Digital Nomads: Platforms offering digital nomad visas and co-working opportunities for remote professionals could be developed. Malta's successful practices in this area could be taken as an example.

Virtual Reality Experiences: Virtual reality (VR) tours could be developed for tourists who cannot physically travel to the TRNC. This could overcome promotional barriers and spark interest in potential tourists.

Gretzel et al. (2020) state that digital borders differ from physical and political borders, and that this could create opportunities, particularly for regions experiencing political recognition issues. The TRNC could increase its international visibility through digital platforms and partially overcome the disadvantages created by recognition issues.

4.2.4 Digital Solutions for Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is one of the most important tourism trends today, and digital platforms play a significant role in this area. Gössling (2017) emphasizes that digital technologies are an important tool in the dissemination of sustainable tourism practices.

According to expert interviews, digital solutions that can be developed for sustainable tourism in the TRNC are as follows:

Crowd Management Systems: Mobile applications can be developed to monitor crowds at popular beaches and tourist spots in real time and regulate visitor flow.

Resource Efficiency Applications: Smart hotel systems that optimize water and energy consumption, and applications that encourage sustainable tourist behavior, can be developed.

Local Producer-Tourist Connection Platforms: Digital marketplaces that connect tourists directly with local producers can be created. This can support the local economy and reduce carbon footprint.

Ecotourism Experience Platforms: Digital platforms that offer sustainable tourism activities and raise environmental awareness can be developed in protected areas such as the Karpaz National Park.

Similar to successful examples in Croatia and Greece (Vodeb & Rudež, 2017), digital platforms that support sustainable tourism can be developed in the TRNC. This approach could help the TRNC use its limited resources more efficiently and support long-term tourism development.

4.3 Challenges and Solutions

4.3.1 Recognition Problems and Digital Solutions

The TRNC's international recognition problems also manifest themselves on digital platforms. Problems encountered in listing on global platforms, payment systems, and legal status make it difficult for TRNC tourism businesses to compete in the digital market.

According to expert interviews, digital solutions that can be developed to overcome recognition problems are as follows:

Region-Focused Marketing Strategies: Regionally focused marketing approaches such as "Northern Cyprus" or "Eastern Mediterranean" could be adopted instead of "TRNC." This could reduce the disadvantages created by recognition problems.

B2B-Focused Digital Solutions: Instead of direct-to-consumer (B2C) platforms, the focus could be on business-to-business (B2B) digital solutions. Digital platforms integrated with travel agencies and tour operators in Türkiye and other friendly countries could be developed.

Intermediary Models: Models for gaining a presence on global platforms through businesses in Türkiye or other countries could be developed. This approach is already being used by some TRNC hotels.

Alternative Payment Systems: Cryptocurrency, digital wallets, and alternative payment solutions can be integrated to overcome barriers in traditional banking systems.

Altınay and Bowen (2017) examined the challenges posed by recognition issues in TRNC tourism and noted that digital platforms offer opportunities to partially overcome these issues. Blockchain technology and distributed systems, in particular, can play a significant role in mitigating the economic impact of political recognition issues.

4.3.2 Technical Infrastructure and Human Resources

One of the biggest obstacles to digital entrepreneurship in the TRNC is the lack of technical infrastructure and qualified human resources. According to expert interviews, the TRNC needs development in its internet infrastructure, access to cloud services, and digital payment systems.

Possible suggestions to address this issue include:

University-Industry Collaboration: Collaboration programs could be developed between universities in the TRNC and the tourism sector. Digital tourism-focused training programs and certifications can be created.

Technology Incubation Centers: Technology incubation centers and acceleration programs focusing on digital tourism initiatives can be implemented.

Foreign Expert Programs: Incentive programs and visa facilitation can be provided to attract competent foreign experts in the field of digital tourism.

Partnerships with Technology Companies in Türkiye: Strategic partnerships can be established with successful technology companies and digital tourism platforms in Türkiye.

Şahin and Öztürk (2019) emphasize the importance of training programs and technical support to increase the digital competencies of tourism enterprises in the TRNC. Capacity building programs are particularly vital for the digital transformation of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises.

4.3.3 Financing and Investment

Funding for digital startups in the TRNC is becoming increasingly difficult due to international recognition issues. Access to global venture capital funds and international investors is limited.

Solutions that can be developed to overcome this challenge are as follows:

Collaboration with Türkiye-Based Venture Capital Funds: Collaborations can be developed with venture capital funds and angel investor networks in Türkiye.

Blockchain-Based Crowdfunding Solutions: Since access to traditional financing sources is limited, blockchain-based crowdfunding platforms can be an alternative financing source.

Special Government Incentives for Digital Tourism Initiatives: The TRNC government can provide support such as special incentive programs, tax advantages, and incubation centers to digital tourism startups.

Turkish Diaspora Investor Networks: Investor networks targeting the Turkish diaspora and entrepreneurs of TRNC origin worldwide can be established.

Karaoğlu (2018) examined the financing problems of tourism startups in the TRNC and emphasized the importance of alternative financing models. Diaspora investors and crowdfunding platforms, in particular, can offer significant opportunities for the TRNC, where traditional financing sources are limited.

5. Conclusion

This study comparatively analyzed digital travel platforms in the TRNC and other Mediterranean countries and evaluated local digital entrepreneurship opportunities for the TRNC. The research results show that the TRNC is at a development stage in the digital tourism ecosystem compared to other Mediterranean countries, but with the right strategies, this situation can be turned into an opportunity.

The main findings of the research can be summarized as follows:

Global Platform Access: The representation of the TRNC on global digital travel platforms is limited due to international recognition issues. The presence of businesses in the TRNC on global platforms such as Booking.com, Airbnb and Expedia is low.

National Digital Platforms: The national digital travel platform of the TRNC (Visitnorthcyprus) has more limited features compared to the platforms of other Mediterranean countries. Countries such as Spain, Italy and France have developed advanced platforms using AR/VR technologies, artificial intelligence and big data analytics.

Local Experience Economy: The presence of local experience-focused digital platforms in the TRNC is limited. However, in countries such as Spain, Italy and Greece, digital platforms offering local gastronomy, cultural experiences and authentic lifestyles are widespread.

Digital Entrepreneurship Opportunities: There are significant digital entrepreneurship opportunities for the TRNC in the areas of digital solutions for niche markets, local experience economy, cross-border cooperation and sustainable tourism.

Challenges: The main challenges facing digital tourism entrepreneurship in the TRNC are recognition problems, inadequate technical infrastructure, lack of qualified human resources and financing difficulties.

Based on the research findings, the following policy recommendations can be offered to develop the TRNC's digital tourism ecosystem:

Digital Tourism Strategy: A comprehensive digital tourism strategy should be developed by the TRNC Ministry of Tourism. This strategy should include digital solutions to overcome recognition issues, niche market-focused approaches, and initiatives that support the local experience economy.

Digital Tourism Innovation Centers: Incubation centers and acceleration programs that support digital tourism initiatives should be established in the TRNC. These centers should provide technical support, mentoring, and financing opportunities.

Training Programs: Training programs to enhance digital competencies for tourism sector employees and entrepreneurs should be developed. Digital tourism-focused certificate and diploma programs can be implemented in collaboration with TRNC universities.

Regulatory Improvements: Legal regulations should be made to facilitate digital tourism entrepreneurship. A regulatory framework should be established, particularly for the use of cryptocurrency, blockchain, and alternative payment systems.

Incentive Programs: Special tax advantages, grant programs, and low-interest loan opportunities should be provided to digital tourism initiatives.

This study contributes to the limited literature examining the digital tourism ecosystem in the TRNC. It offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by regions facing barriers to international recognition on digital platforms. From a sectoral perspective, the research findings can help guide the digital transformation of tourism businesses in the TRNC. Digital entrepreneurship models, particularly those focused on niche markets and the local experience economy, can provide sustainable growth for TRNC tourism.

This research has some limitations. First of all, there are a limited number of academic studies on the digital tourism ecosystem in the TRNC, which limited the scope of the literature review. Future studies can include research to measure the effectiveness of digital solutions for specific tourism segments (gambling tourism, health tourism, education tourism) in the TRNC and in-depth research on digital tourism cooperation models between the TRNC and Türkiye. It can be adapted to the conditions of TRNC by taking lessons from the new entrepreneurship models brought about by new digitalization in other Mediterranean countries. Thus, TRNC tourism can increase its competitiveness and partially overcome international recognition problems by accelerating the digital transformation process.

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