

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN TOURISM: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND SDGs FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE¹

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how digital transformation is reshaping public relations in the tourism sector and examines its impact on consumer expectations within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 8, 9 and 12). It focuses on the integration of digital tools into public relations strategies and the role of these tools in strengthening business communication and improving consumer relationships. The study is based on the existing literature on digital public relations, sustainable tourism and consumer experience. The study is examined the interconnected roles of SDGs 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) in the context of digital transformation in tourism communication. A qualitative research approach was adopted, and case studies and a systematic literature review were conducted on digital public relations practices in the tourism sector. This study evaluates the effectiveness of digital communication strategies implemented in tourism enterprises by analyzing sector-specific trends. The findings reveal that digital public relations increase the interaction between tourism businesses and consumers, encourage stronger participation and increase brand credibility. Digital strategies not only build consumer trust, but also contribute to economic and social development. In line with SDG 8, digitalization in tourism expands employment opportunities and promotes economic growth. In the context of SDG 9, developments in technology and infrastructure improve tourism services and accessibility. In addition, SDG 12 emphasizes how digital public relations can promote sustainable tourism practices and responsible consumer behavior. This study provides a detailed perspective on how digital public relations can be aligned with sustainability goals in the tourism sector. It emphasizes that tourism businesses should embrace digital transformation to meet changing consumer expectations, while also emphasizing the importance of adhering to responsible and ethical communication strategies. This study investigate the role of digital transformation on communication strategies in the tourism sector by discussing the concepts of digital public relations and sustainable tourism in a theoretical framework. By evaluating the place of digital public relations in the context of sustainable tourism from a holistic perspective, it offers conceptual review on how digital tools can be used effectively in line with sustainability goals.

Keywords: Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), Tourism Sector, Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (SDG 9), Digital Transformation, Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG 12), Social Media.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries, offering individuals opportunities to explore different cultures, embark on new experiences, and contribute to economic growth. However, with the rapid advancement of digitalization and communication technologies, tourism practices have undergone significant transformations (Nabila, 2023). Today, travelers rely heavily on digital platforms for planning, booking accommodations, and evaluating experiences, fundamentally reshaping the industry (Bhatt & Pickering, 2023). While these technological changes present new opportunities for businesses, they also bring challenges, requiring adaptation to evolving consumer expectations.

One of the most notable changes in this transformation is the increasing role of social media and emerging digital technologies. Travelers are no longer passive consumers of tourism services; they actively seek personalized and immersive experiences that align with their expectations (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012, p. 321). Recent studies highlight that digitalization enhances customer engagement, strengthens destination branding, and improves tourism management strategies (Buhalis, Leung, & Lin, 2023). Among these developments, the Metaverse and virtual tourism applications are beginning to redefine public relations (PR) strategies, offering new ways to engage consumers and market tourism destinations.

The shift towards digital tourism is closely aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In particular (Leal Filho, Azul, Brandli, Lange Salvia, & Wall, 2021):

SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): Digital transformation in tourism fosters economic growth and creates new job opportunities.

SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure): Technology supports sustainable infrastructure development and innovation within the sector.

SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production): Digital PR can promote eco-conscious tourism practices and encourage responsible travel behaviors.

One of the key advantages of digitalization in tourism is the expansion of access to international markets. Digital platforms eliminate geographical limitations, allowing businesses to connect with a global customer base and improve service quality (Pencarelli, 2020). In addition, these platforms help businesses better understand consumer preferences and offer customized travel experiences that play a key role in increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty (Buhalis, et al., 2019). Metaverse technologies, virtual tourism experiences, and digital PR applications have the potential to create new employment opportunities in the tourism sector, contributing to SDG 8 by promoting sustainable economic growth (Buhalis, Leung, & Lin, 2023). Additionally, social media, email marketing, and mobile applications help businesses instantly communicate with customers, provide personalized promotions, and enhance consumer relationships. The ability to receive real-time customer feedback allows businesses to continuously improve their services, thereby increasing their competitiveness (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). According to Buhalis et al. (2019), digital transformation provides competitive advantage by increasing customer loyalty and brand recognition in tourism. Integrating public relations strategies with



technological innovations strengthens the role of digitalization in sustainable tourism development by improving destination branding efforts (Ramya, Boaler, & Murthy, 2024). Metaverse-based tourism applications provide more effective destination management by supporting infrastructure development through digital twin technology (Wang, 2024). Also, the use of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies modernize tourism promotion and marketing, offering new ways to engage with **travellers** (Rane, Choudhary, & Rane, 2023). These innovations are aligned with SDG 9 by promoting the development of sustainable and technologically advanced tourism infrastructure (Castle & Bornman, 2021).

While digital transformation offers numerous benefits, it also brings ethical and operational challenges. The increased use of customer data raises privacy concerns along with the potential risks of data breaches and unauthorized use. In addition, as digitalization progresses, businesses must make large investments in updating technologies and training staff, which can lead to high operational costs (Abbasi, Tsiotsou, Hussain, Rather, & Ting, 2023).

This transformation is in line with SDG 12, which emphasizes the need for responsible consumption and production in tourism. Xiong et al. (2023) emphasize that environmental awareness plays an important role in shaping tourists' responsible consumption behaviors. Metaverse and digital tourism applications offer environmentally sustainable alternatives by reducing the environmental footprint of mass tourism. Public relations campaigns promoting environmentally sensitive tourism initiatives further strengthen SDG 12 by promoting sustainable tourism behaviors and ethical consumption patterns.

This study examines the impact of digital transformation on public relations (PR) in the tourism sector, focusing specifically on the accommodation sector. It investigates how digital technologies, especially in the Metaverse, create new opportunities and challenges in PR and consumer engagement. Tourism businesses can now interact with consumers in a more personalized way, monitor feedback more effectively, and increase customer satisfaction through customized experiences. However, this digital transformation has also increased consumer expectations, necessitated businesses offering more unique and meaningful experiences.

This study aims to investigate how digitalization has reshaped PR strategies in the tourism sector, while also assessing the role of SDG 8, SDG 9, and SDG 12 in promoting sustainable digital tourism practices.

2. Literature Review

Tourism has long been recognized as a key driver of economic growth, cultural exchange, and international cooperation. However, in the era of digital transformation and sustainability concerns, researchers are increasingly focusing on integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into tourism practices. In particular, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) have been identified as critical focal points in the tourism sector (Marin & Bocioaca, 2023).



2.1 The Role of Public Relations in Sustainable Tourism

Public relations (PR) has become an essential tool for promoting sustainable tourism practices, raising awareness among stakeholders, and fostering responsible consumer behaviors. Yavuz (2016) emphasized that the tourism industry significantly contributes to the global economy, with nearly one billion people engaging in tourism activities annually. However, the rapid expansion of tourism has also exacerbated environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and resource overconsumption. The study highlights that sustainability-focused PR strategies can encourage businesses to maintain a balance between preservation and utilization, aligning with SDG 12 by promoting responsible tourism behaviors.

Similarly, Yetkin (2016) pointed out that Turkey's tourism sector has not sufficiently prioritized public relations within its strategic planning. Despite efforts to promote sustainable tourism, gaps in communication, stakeholder engagement, and destination branding have hindered progress. This underscores the importance of integrating digital PR strategies to support sustainable tourism policies, eco-friendly business practices, and cultural heritage preservation (SDG 9).

2.2 Digital Public Relations and Consumer Engagement

The increasing role of social media and digital communication tools has transformed tourism PR strategies, enabling real-time consumer engagement and interactive marketing (Imre, 2020). Digital platforms allow tourism businesses to communicate sustainability initiatives effectively, shaping public perception and promoting responsible travel. However, the rapid spread of negative publicity and misinformation on social media can pose challenges for tourism businesses (Ozgüner & Uçar, 2015).

Studies have shown that social media enhances tourist engagement, fosters customer loyalty, and strengthens destination branding (Ciftçi, 2016). However, Huang, Weng, and Bao (2022) argued that the effectiveness of digital tourism interpretations depends on their content, media format, and the way information is presented. Their findings indicate that visitors respond differently to sustainability-related messages based on their format (audio, visual, or multimedia). This suggests that digital PR campaigns should incorporate interactive and immersive elements—such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR)—to enhance engagement and align with SDG 9 and SDG 12.

2.3 Business Models and Sustainable Tourism

The concept of business models in tourism has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in the context of sustainability and digital transformation. Four key themes have been identified for business models in the tourism sector (Reinhold, Zach, & Krizaj, 2017):

Comparison and analysis of different tourism business model configurations (e.g. accommodation, transportation and e-commerce).

Assessment of the role of monetary and non-monetary value creation processes in tourism.

Analysis of sustainability and efficiency as key components of tourism business models.



Investigation of the impact of regulatory policies on tourism business models.

The study highlights that digital transformation enables businesses to create and sustain sustainable value, thus aligning with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). Through the integration of innovative digital PR strategies, businesses can increase customer engagement, optimize resource use and minimize environmental impacts.

In addition, Metaverse and virtual tourism applications offer new opportunities for sustainable destination management, allowing the reduction of overtourism and environmental pressure. These new trends highlight the need for innovative and technology-driven business models and are aligned with the priorities of SDG 12 (Responsible Production and Consumption).

2.4 Interpretation and Sustainable Tourism Development

Interpretation is defined as the transfer of cultural and environmental information to tourists and plays a critical role in promoting sustainable tourism behaviors. Studies show that effective interpretation increases environmental protection awareness, strengthens cultural awareness, and promotes positive attitudes among visitors (Bramwell & Lane, 1993); (Weng, Liang, & Bao, 2020). However, Huang, Weng, and Bao (2022) state that most tourism interpretation studies ignore economic and socio-cultural sustainability and focus more on environmental elements. Research findings indicate that interpretation strategies should be more comprehensive and include economic and social sustainability themes. In addition, sensory experiences in tourism interpretation (e.g., audio guides, interactive exhibitions, mobile applications) significantly affect visitors' perception and learning processes (Krishna & Schwarz, 2014). These findings highlight the importance of digital storytelling and innovative technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) in increasing the effectiveness of interpretation. Such technologies are contributed to SDG 12's goal of promoting responsible consumption and sustainable tourism behaviors.

2.5 The Future of Digital PR in Sustainable Tourism

As the tourism industry continues to evolve in the digital age, public relations (PR) must adapt to new communication paradigms. Future research should focus on the following topics:

How digital PR strategies can align with SDGs to promote sustainability in tourism.

The role of emerging technologies (e.g., AI, blockchain, Metaverse) in shaping sustainable tourism practices.

The impact of interactive and immersive media on consumer behavior and responsible travel.

The integration of sustainability principles into digital PR and business models will be essential for ensuring long-term resilience and competitiveness in the tourism sector.

3. Digital Transformation in Public Relations

In today's world, digital transformation has revolutionized public relations (PR), particularly in service industries such as tourism. The rapid development of communication technologies, the internet, and social media has provided businesses with unprecedented



opportunities to implement PR strategies more effectively and efficiently (Akar, 2010). These digital tools allow organizations to reach a global audience, receive real-time feedback, deliver corporate updates instantly, and optimize communication costs, making PR not just a communication tool but a strategic management asset.

Public relations involve planning and executing communication strategies aimed at various stakeholders, including customers, business partners, employees, and policymakers (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 8). With the rise of digital technologies, PR professionals now have greater opportunities to engage these audiences in personalized, interactive, and data-driven ways.

3.1 The Role of Social Media in Digital PR

Social media has emerged as one of the most influential digital PR tools. With a rapidly growing global user base, social media platforms provide businesses with an efficient and cost-effective means of reaching their target audience (Yeniçıktı & Tarakçı, 2023). These platforms are not only used for brand communication, but also play an important role in marketing, crisis management, reputation building, and consumer engagement.

Given the competitive nature of the tourism industry, social media is a vital tool for promoting destinations, improving customer relationships, and increasing consumer trust (Roth-Cohen & Avidar, 2022). Research highlights that social media-focused PR campaigns can increase brand awareness, shape public perception, and encourage customer loyalty (Gesualdi, 2019).

Furthermore, social media serves as a powerful platform to promote sustainable tourism initiatives in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12: Responsible Consumption and Production. Many tourism businesses use social media for the following purposes (ESCAP, U., 2021):

Encouraging environmentally friendly travel behaviors through digital storytelling.

Engaging environmentally conscious travelers and encouraging responsible tourism choices.

Educating tourists about sustainability issues and reducing negative environmental impacts.

Thus, social media not only strengthens corporate communication but also promotes sustainability efforts in tourism.

3.2 Emerging Digital Technologies in PR and SDGs

Beyond social media, emerging digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR) and Metaverse are reshaping PR strategies in tourism. These innovations enhance consumer engagement, personalize customer interactions, and offer immersive brand experiences, supporting SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (Singh & Ru, 2023).

VR and AR: These technologies provide virtual tourism experiences, allowing travelers to explore destinations before visiting them physically. This helps reduce overtourism and aligns with SDG 12 by promoting sustainable travel choices (Ali, Rasoolimanesh, & Cobanoglu, 2020)

AI-powered chatbots and sentiment analysis: AI enhances customer engagement by providing real-time responses to inquiries, improving service quality and satisfaction (SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth) (Rai, Brown, & Ruwanpura, 2019).

The Metaverse: Tourism businesses are now experimenting with Metaverse-based PR strategies to create virtual destination experiences, interactive travel guides, and digital brand storytelling (Buhalis, Leung, & Lin, 2023).

As digital transformation continues, public relations professionals must adapt their strategies to leverage these technologies effectively. Tourism businesses that integrate these innovations into their PR efforts will not only improve customer engagement but also contribute to sustainable tourism development.

3.3 Challenges and Opportunities in Digital PR

While digital transformation provides numerous advantages, it also introduces ethical, operational, and strategic challenges for tourism businesses (Rusli, 2022):

Privacy and Data Security Risks: The increasing use of consumer data raises privacy concerns and potential data security risks. Companies must ensure compliance with data protection regulations such as GDPR while maintaining transparency in digital PR efforts.

The Risk of Misinformation: Social media facilitates real-time communication, but it also amplifies the spread of misinformation and negative publicity. Businesses must develop effective crisis communication strategies to manage reputational risks.

The Need for Constant Adaptation: With rapid technological advances, PR professionals must constantly update their skills and strategies to effectively use new tools. Businesses that fail to adapt risk losing their relevance in the competitive tourism market.

Despite these challenges, digital PR offers significant opportunities to improve sustainable tourism practices. Through data-driven strategies, immersive technologies, and social media engagement, tourism businesses can create more effective, inclusive, and responsible PR campaigns.

Digital transformation has fundamentally changed the role of PR in tourism, providing businesses with new ways to communicate, engage with customers, and promote sustainability. Social media, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, and the Metaverse are reshaping PR strategies, aligning them with SDG 8, SDG 9, and SDG 12.

Future research should focus on:

How to further align digital PR strategies with the SDGs.

The impact of immersive technologies (VR, AR, Metaverse) on consumer behavior.

Best practices for integrating AI into tourism PR efforts.

By strategically using digital tools, tourism businesses can increase their communication effectiveness while advancing sustainable tourism initiatives.

4. Social Media Awareness in Public Relations Practices for the Hospitality Industry

In today's digital world, social media has become a critical tool for public relations (PR) strategies, especially in the tourism and hospitality industry. The unique characteristics of tourism-such as experience-based decision-making and user-generated content-make



social media one of the most influential factors in shaping consumer preferences (Khan, 2022).

Travelers now have instant access to reviews, ratings, and shared experiences from other tourists, significantly impacting their destination choices, accommodation preferences, and service expectations.

From a sustainability perspective (SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production), social media plays a crucial role in promoting ethical tourism practices. Digital platforms enable tourism organizations to (O'Connor, 2023):

Encourage responsible tourism behaviors by sharing information on sustainable travel practices.

Combat misinformation and promote transparency, ensuring that travelers make informed decisions.

Engage tourists in environmental and social responsibility initiatives, such as eco-friendly accommodations and local cultural preservation.

Thus, effective social media management in PR strategies not only influences consumer choices but also fosters a more sustainable and responsible tourism industry.

4.1 The Strategic Role of Social Media in Hospitality PR

Tourism businesses increasingly rely on social media for branding, customer engagement, and crisis communication (Yeniçiktı & Tarakçı, 2023). Effective social media strategies allow businesses to:

Enhance destination appeal by showcasing attractions through visually engaging content.

Improve customer satisfaction by enabling real-time interaction and responsiveness.

Manage online reputation by addressing negative reviews and maintaining brand credibility.

Moreover, social media empowers customers to become brand ambassadors, amplifying the reach of marketing and PR efforts. The digital word-of-mouth effect has made social media a key driver of consumer trust and engagement (Imre, 2020).

From an SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) perspective, digital transformation in PR enhances innovation and accessibility in tourism. Businesses that integrate AI-powered chatbots, predictive analytics, and immersive media (such as Virtual Reality - VR and Augmented Reality - AR) into their social media strategies can personalize user experiences and optimize customer engagement (Ali, Rasoolimanesh, & Cobanoglu, 2020).

4.2 Information Management and Digital PR Strategies in Tourism

The hospitality industry must implement a well-structured information management system to leverage digital transformation effectively. The data-driven nature of social media makes it an essential tool for collecting, analysing, and applying consumer insights. PR strategies in tourism can be divided into four key stages of information management (Liebowitz, 2010):



Information Capture: Collecting data on customer preferences, travel trends, and emerging markets.

Information Sharing: Engaging with audiences through blogs, reviews, influencer marketing, and interactive campaigns.

Information Application: Using analytics to refine marketing strategies and improve customer experiences.

Information Creation: Developing innovative tourism products and services based on consumer insights.

By optimizing the flow of information through digital PR, tourism businesses can increase consumer engagement, develop more targeted campaigns, and develop long-term customer relationships

4.3 Maturity Stages of Digital PR in the Hospitality Industry

According to Liebowitz (2010) the application of new communication technologies in PR follows five maturity levels:

Zero Level: Minimal awareness of digital PR dominated by traditional communication methods.

Awareness Stage: Initial exposure to digital PR; businesses begin to realize the potential of online engagement.

Launch Stage: Small-scale digital PR projects and pilot programs emerge.

Interest Stage: Organizations invest in advanced digital PR strategies, including influencer partnerships and AI-enabled marketing.

Penetration Stage: Full integration of social media, data analytics, and AI into PR and marketing leads to a seamless customer experience. Tourism businesses in the "Penetration Stage" have fully embraced social media as a PR tool, effectively engaging with consumers, managing online reputation, and optimizing brand storytelling.

4.4 Social Media as a Sustainability Tool in Tourism PR

Beyond marketing, social media plays a critical role in driving sustainable tourism (Imre, 2020). PR campaigns can leverage digital platforms to educate tourists on responsible travel behaviors, such as:

Reducing carbon footprints by promoting eco-friendly travel options.

Supporting local communities through ethical tourism initiatives.

Raising awareness of overtourism and conservation efforts.

By aligning their social media strategies with SDG 12, tourism businesses can increase their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts and contribute to a more sustainable future.

Social media has transformed public relations in the tourism sector, providing businesses with a powerful tool for branding, customer engagement, and sustainability advocacy. From an SDG perspective:

SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): Digital PR increases employment opportunities in tourism marketing and social media management.

SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure): Artificial Intelligence, VR and big data are shaping the future of PR strategies in tourism.



SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production): Social media is a key driver of sustainable tourism awareness and responsible travel behaviour.

As the hospitality industry continues to evolve, businesses that effectively integrate digital PR strategies with sustainability initiatives will gain a competitive advantage and foster long-term consumer trust.

5. Conclusion

Digital transformation is redefining public relations in the tourism sector, presenting both opportunities and challenges for businesses. As travelers increasingly rely on digital platforms for travel planning, experience evaluation and real-time information sharing, the role of social media has become central in shaping consumer behavior and influencing travel decisions. This transformation allow tourism businesses to expand their global reach, personalize experiences, and collect consumer feedback, thereby increasing customer satisfaction and brand loyalty.

However, the shift towards digitally focused public relations also increases consumers' expectations for highly personalized and unique travel experiences. To remain competitive, tourism businesses must move beyond traditional communication methods and adopt a strategic, technology-driven PR approach. In this context, digital PR not only serves as a marketing and branding tool, but also plays a critical role in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable tourism practices (SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production).

In addition, the integration of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Metaverse are revolutionizing consumer engagement, destination marketing, and business operations. These innovations are aligned with SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) by driving technological advances in the tourism sector. From an economic perspective, digital PR strategies contribute to job creation, innovation and long-term business sustainability, and directly support SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). By leveraging data-driven marketing, consumer insights and real-time communication, tourism businesses can create a more resilient, competitive and sustainable industry.

Future Impacts

As the tourism industry continues to adapt to the digital age, businesses that effectively integrate public relations with technological innovations will gain a strategic advantage. Future research should examine:

The development of AI, VR and AR in shaping digital PR strategies.

How digital PR can be further aligned with the SDGs to promote sustainability in tourism.

The ethical and regulatory challenges of AI-enabled PR in tourism.

By embracing digital transformation as a tool for innovation and sustainability, tourism businesses can increase consumer trust, improve stakeholder relationships and contribute to the broader goals of sustainable development.



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