

## RURAL SMART TOURISM AND ITS IMPACT ON SUSTAINABLE DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

**Abstract:** In recent years, the concept of smart tourism has gained traction as a transformative approach to enhancing travel experiences through the integration of technology, data, and community engagement. While traditionally associated with urban settings, the principles of smart tourism are now being applied in rural areas, leading to the emergence of rural smart tourism. This innovative approach not only leverages advanced technologies to improve visitor experiences but also emphasizes sustainable practices that benefit local communities and preserve the environment. As rural destinations seek to enhance their attractiveness and competitiveness in the global tourism market, understanding the definition, characteristics, benefits, and challenges of rural smart tourism is essential for fostering sustainable destination development. Research conducted among 213 members of the selo.rs site showed the positive effects of membership, which were reflected in two effects: Networking and Access to information. This confirmed the initial hypothesis that participation and membership on sites like selo.rs contribute to sustainable development for rural destinations.

**Keywords:** rural smart tourism, sustainability, destination development, digital transformation

## RURALNI PAMETNI TURIZAM I NJEGOV UTICAJ NA ODRŽIVI RAZVOJ DESTINACIJE

**Apstrakt:** Poslednjih godina, koncept pametnog turizma je dobio na snazi kao transformativni pristup poboljšanju doživljaja putovanja kroz integraciju tehnologije, podataka i angažovanja zajednice. Iako su tradicionalno povezani sa urbanim sredinama, principi pametnog turizma se sada primenjuju u ruralnim područjima, što dovodi do pojave ruralnog pametnog turizma. Ovaj inovativni pristup ne samo da koristi napredne tehnologije za poboljšanje iskustva posetilaca, već takođe nalaže održive prakse koje koriste lokalnim zajednicama i čuvaju životnu sredinu. Kako ruralne destinacije nastoje da poboljšaju svoju atraktivnost i konkurenčnost na globalnom turističkom tržištu, razumevanje definicije, karakteristika, prednosti i izazova ruralnog pametnog turizma je od suštinskog značaja za podsticanje održivog razvoja destinacije. Istraživanje sprovedeno među 213 članova sajta selo.rs pokazalo je pozitivne efekte članstva, koji su se ogledali u dva efekta: Umrežavanje i Pristup informacijama. Time je potvrđena početna hipoteza da učešće i članstvo na sajтовima poput selo.rs doprinose održivom razvoju ruralnih destinacija.

**Ključne reči:** ruralni pametni turizam, održivost, razvoj destinacija, digitalna transformacija

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Boes et al. (2015), rural smart tourism can be defined as a strategic approach to tourism development in rural areas that utilizes technology and data-driven solutions to enhance visitor experiences while promoting sustainability and community involvement. Unlike traditional tourism, which often prioritizes economic gain at the expense of local cultures and environments, rural smart tourism seeks to create a harmonious balance between tourism activities and the well-being of local communities. Key characteristics of rural smart tourism include technology integration (Brunswicker, 2016) where digital tools such as mobile applications, virtual reality, and data analytics are employed to provide personalized and efficient experiences for travelers (Bozeman, 2000; Pencarelli, 2020). For instance, rural destinations might use mobile apps to guide visitors through local attractions, share cultural stories, or provide real-time updates on events. Additionally, community involvement is a cornerstone of rural smart tourism, as locals are engaged in decision-making processes, ensuring that tourism development reflects their values and needs. A notable example is the "Smart Villages" initiative in Europe, which empowers rural communities to utilize smart technologies for tourism development, thereby enhancing local economies and preserving cultural heritage (Jovičić, 2019). The benefits of rural smart tourism for sustainable destination development are multifaceted, encompassing economic, environmental, and social dimensions (Bogers et al., 2017). Economically, rural smart tourism can lead to increased income generation and job creation for local communities. By attracting tech-savvy travelers who prioritize authentic and immersive experiences, rural areas can diversify their economic activities beyond traditional agriculture and resource extraction. This diversification is further supported by the rise of remote work and digital nomadism, where individuals seek temporary stays in rural settings, thus boosting local economies (Pencarelli, 2020). Environmentally, rural smart tourism promotes conservation practices and responsible resource management by encouraging sustainable tourism practices (Jovičić, 2019). For example, initiatives that focus on eco-tourism and the preservation of natural landscapes can lead to the establishment of protected areas, benefiting both wildlife and local communities. Socially, rural smart tourism enhances cultural preservation and community engagement by fostering connections between visitors and locals. Events such as cultural festivals or workshops that showcase traditional crafts not only enrich the visitor experience but also reinforce the identity and heritage of rural communities.

According to Jovičić (2019), despite the promising prospects of rural smart tourism, several challenges and considerations must be addressed to ensure its successful implementation. One significant barrier is technological access; many rural areas lack the necessary infrastructure and digital literacy required to fully leverage smart tourism tools (Gonzalez-Reverte, 2019). This digital divide can hinder the ability of local businesses to compete in the increasingly technology-driven tourism landscape (Briciu et al., 2020). Furthermore, balancing tourism growth with environmental sustainability poses another challenge. The influx of tourists can strain local resources and ecosystems, leading to potential degradation if not managed effectively. It is crucial for rural destinations to adopt sustainable tourism practic-

es that mitigate negative impacts while maximizing benefits. Additionally, ensuring equitable benefits for local communities is paramount to prevent exploitation and resentment among residents. According to (Gonzalez-Reverte, 2019; Vitković, 2015), as rural smart tourism initiatives are developed, it is essential to prioritize inclusive planning processes that involve local stakeholders, protect their rights, and ensure that they reap the rewards of tourism development.

It started from the main hypothesis *H1*: Participation and membership on digital platforms like *selo.rs* contribute to the sustainable development of rural tourism destinations by positively impacting business operations in two key areas: a) *Networking*: Membership enhances visibility, fosters partnerships, and enables participation in tourism projects and programs and b) *Access to Information*: Membership improves awareness of market trends, competitive insights, and knowledge-sharing among rural tourism providers.

Such a site has a win-win effect. Service providers in rural tourism and for tourists. All the relevant information about the tourist products in rural destinations, but also through the interactive platform and communication. The growth of rural tourism in recent years can be attributed to a confluence of factors that resonate with contemporary travelers' preferences (Vujko et al., 2024a). One primary driver is the increasing interest in nature and outdoor activities, as more people seek refuge from urban environments and the stresses of modern life. According to a report by the World Tourism Organization, nature-based tourism has witnessed a steady rise, with many travelers prioritizing destinations that offer scenic landscapes and opportunities for adventure. Furthermore, the rise of experiential travel has shifted the focus from passive sightseeing to active participation in local culture. Tourists are now more inclined to engage in hands-on experiences, such as farm stays, traditional craft workshops, and culinary tours, which allow them to connect with the local community (Vujko et al., 2024b). This shift toward authentic experiences has made rural destinations more appealing, as they often provide unique opportunities to immerse oneself in the local way of life (Panić et al., 2024).

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed tourism, offering new opportunities for rural destinations to enhance visitor experiences while promoting sustainability and local community well-being. However, rural areas often face challenges in leveraging smart tourism due to limited technological infrastructure, digital literacy gaps, and the need for balanced tourism development. In this context, *selo.rs*, an online platform dedicated to rural tourism in Serbia, serves as an essential tool for connecting rural tourism providers, facilitating information exchange, and fostering networking opportunities. This research examines the role of digital platforms like *selo.rs* in the sustainable development of rural tourism, focusing on the *perceived benefits for members in terms of networking and access to information*. **The main objective of this research is: to explore the role of digital platforms in rural smart tourism development** and their potential to support sustainable tourism initiatives. The study builds on the concept of *rural smart tourism*, which integrates digital tools to support economic, environmental, and social sustainability. It aims to assess whether participation in *selo.rs* contributes to the growth and sustainability of rural tourism businesses by enhancing *visibility, collaboration, and access to market information*.

The survey was conducted among hosts, owners of properties intended for rural tourism, members of the selo.rs website. They were presented with a series of answers that they rated on a five-point Likert scale. Membership in selo.rs contributes positively and significantly to business in two domains: through *Networking and Access to information*. This confirmed the initial hypothesis.

## **2. ROLE OF A DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN DEVELOPMENT OF A RURAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS**

According to Roblek et al. (2021) new technologies have revolutionized the way rural tourism businesses promote their offerings and connect with potential visitors. Digital marketing has become a cornerstone of marketing strategies for these enterprises, enabling them to reach wider audiences than ever before (Mandić et al., 2024). For instance, rural hotels and guesthouses can now utilize search engine optimization (SEO) techniques to improve their visibility on search engines, driving organic traffic to their websites. Additionally, social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook have become essential tools for promotion, as they allow businesses to showcase picturesque landscapes, authentic experiences, and customer testimonials to a global audience (Roblek et al., 2013). The visual nature of these platforms resonates particularly well with the target demographic of rural tourism, which often seeks aesthetically pleasing and shareable content. Furthermore, the implementation of online booking systems and user-friendly websites has streamlined the reservation process, making it easier for travelers to plan their trips. Many rural businesses have adopted these technologies, resulting in an enhanced user experience that can lead to increased bookings and customer satisfaction.

In addition to promotion, technology has significantly enhanced operational efficiency for businesses in the rural tourism sector. Management software has emerged as a valuable tool, enabling operators to streamline various business processes, from booking management to financial tracking. For example, comprehensive reservation systems allow for real-time availability updates and automated confirmation emails, which reduce administrative burdens and minimize the risk of overbooking (Sepas-gozar et al., 2019). Moreover, customer relationship management (CRM) systems enable businesses to maintain detailed records of guest interactions, preferences, and feedback, fostering personalized communication that can enhance customer loyalty. Inventory and resource management tools also play a crucial role in optimizing operations; by accurately tracking supplies and resources, rural tourism businesses can reduce waste and improve cost-efficiency. The integration of these technologies not only enhances the overall guest experience but also empowers rural operators to compete more effectively in a rapidly evolving tourism landscape (Spencer et al., 2012). The role of digital transformation in the development of rural tourism destinations is profound and multifaceted. By redefining marketing strategies, increasing visibility, and enhancing visitor experiences, digital technologies have become indispensable tools for rural tourism operators seeking to thrive in a competitive landscape. The historical evolution of rural tourism and the current trends in digital adoption highlight the necessity for stakeholders to embrace these changes to attract and engage visitors effectively. As rural destinations continue to harness the power of

digital transformation, they not only enhance their economic viability but also ensure the preservation of their cultural and natural heritage for future generations. The on-going digital revolution offers a promising future for rural tourism, where innovation and tradition coexist harmoniously (Verma & Shukla, 2019).

Enhancements in visitor experience through digital tools represent another critical aspect of digital transformation in rural tourism. The implementation of mobile applications and interactive guides has revolutionized how visitors engage with attractions. For instance, destinations like the Cotswolds in England have developed apps that provide visitors with curated walking routes, local history, and recommendations for dining and accommodations, enriching their overall experience. Furthermore, the integration of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies has allowed rural attractions to showcase their offerings in innovative ways (Weidenfeld, 2018). For example, the National Parks of the USA have introduced VR experiences that allow potential visitors to explore park features from the comfort of their homes, effectively piquing their interest and prompting real-life visits (Willard, 2012). Feedback mechanisms, such as online review platforms, coupled with data analytics, enable tourism providers to gather insights about visitor preferences and behaviors, allowing them to tailor services and offerings more effectively. This not only enhances the visitor experience but also contributes to the continuous improvement of rural tourism services.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The impact of digital transformation on marketing and visibility in rural tourism cannot be overstated. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook have become essential tools for promoting rural destinations, allowing for real-time engagement with potential visitors. This shift has enabled rural tourism operators to showcase their unique offerings through visually appealing content, effectively capturing the attention of a global audience. Moreover, the creation of online booking systems has streamlined the reservation process, allowing tourists to plan their trips more efficiently. A notable example is the success of the "Selo.rs" campaign, which utilized targeted social media advertising to promote lesser-known rural destinations, resulting in a significant increase in visitor numbers. Additionally, customer engagement tools, such as email newsletters and personalized travel itineraries, have further enhanced the relationship between tourism providers and potential visitors. These initiatives not only improve visibility but also foster a sense of community among travelers, encouraging them to explore rural areas that may have once seemed inaccessible.

The Serbian Rural Tourism association has created its webpage at [selo.rs](http://selo.rs) so as to deliver information to its users. The national association of rural tourism in Serbia was founded in 2002 by rural tourism service providers grouped in nine associations. The association now counts over 500 members. In 2004 the presentation of [Selo.co.yu](http://Selo.co.yu) was set by the Internet Club, designed to be a database representation of the complete rural tourist offer of Serbia. All municipal tourist organizations and local tourist organizations from cities and municipalities in Serbia which had tourism included in their rural areas, were working on the 2005 project Promotion of Rural Tourism in Serbia. In 2006 over 200 households that are provided in the Database receive 90% of their guests via this portal, which makes it one of the most successful

business models concerning rural development in Serbia. This site was visited by some 300 000 visitors in 2007, which makes it one of the most visited tourism-related sites in Serbia.

They were also involved in the organization of the promotion of rural households at the stand Rural Tourism of Serbia - International Fair of Tourism in Belgrade in 2008, 2009, and 2010. Members of the Association have organized more than 30 seminars, round tables, and workshops on the topics of development and promotion of rural tourism in Serbia. The Association took part in organizing the First Congress of Rural Tourism in 2010. It is the rural tourism of Serbia that is the executor of the activities of the projects supported by: the European Union, the Ministry of Economy and Regional Development of the Republic of Serbia, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of the Republic of Serbia, The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), The United States Embassy, The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in order to develop rural tourism in Serbia. National Association of Rural Tourism of Serbia is a member and the active representative of Serbia in European Federation for Rural Tourism Development EUROGITES.

Among all active members, a subset of 213 was chosen randomly by the system and presented with the group of questions. It wanted to gather information on the benefits of joining the association and membership in selo.rs. These were split into two factors, a few variables later being extracted through analysis. The survey collected data on the perceived advantages of membership, focusing on two key areas: *Networking* and *Access to Information*. Respondents were presented with a structured questionnaire, where they rated their agreement with various statements using a *Likert scale*. To identify underlying dimensions within the survey responses, an *Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)* was conducted. This method helps uncover latent constructs by grouping interrelated variables. The *Principal Component Analysis (PCA)* method was used to extract factors, as it helps reduce dimensionality while preserving the maximum variance. The number of factors was determined based on *eigenvalues greater than 1* and visual inspection of the *scree plot*. Factor loadings were examined, and variables were grouped based on their highest loading.

Two distinct factors emerged:

*Factor 1: Networking* (Visibility on selo.rs leads to greater exposure, links to suppliers, and participation in partnerships).

*Factor 2: Access to Information* (Visibility provides insights into missing elements of the tourist offer, competitive analysis, and experience-sharing opportunities).

#### 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The interaction between the various stakeholders greatly enhances the dissemination of rural tourism, hence access to priceless best practices and success stories. The interactions provided through websites like selo.rs and specific forums of tourism enable the contact among practitioners so that they can exchange insights about their experiences and strategies. This can allow the mutual solution of problems and innovations through partners since professionals in rural tourism can offer ideas for handling common problems such as seasonality, limited resources on their marketing reach.

**Table 1. Visibility on the selo.rs site leads to more visibility for the household?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Much better	129	60,6	60,6	60,6
	Better	77	36,2	36,2	96,7
	No change	7	3,3	3,3	100,0
	Total	213	100,0	100,0	

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025)

Furthermore, participation in these networks means more awareness of emerging trends and consumer preferences-domains critical to their competitive edge. For example, growing interest and consciousness about eco-tourism and responsible travel have prodded many providers of rural tourism to adjust their practice methods. What they learn within these networks is best practices for implementing such changes effectively.

**Table 2. Visibility on the site of selo.rs provides links to suppliers?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Much better	116	54,5	54,5	54,5
	Better	85	39,9	39,9	94,4
	No change	12	5,6	5,6	100,0
	Total	213	100,0	100,0	

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025)

Enrolling in such forums for rural tourism establishes the sense of belonging, support and solidarity within the professional workers in the field. The interaction with the platform such as selo.rs, Facebook groups, or online forums makes them feel at home beyond geographical lines. They give them some space to share their successes and celebrate their victories and also give them psychological and emotional backup from the shared experiences. For instance, when times get tough, like with COVID-19 (Radojević et al., 2020), many rural tourism operators will find solace and a source of encouragement from the information they glean from others who have had to go through the same kind of situation (Mohanty et al., 2020; Petrović et al., 2021; Petrović, Kocić, 2021).

**Table 3. Visibility on the site of selo.rs permits participation in different partners programs and projects?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Much better	115	54,0	54,0	54,0
	Better	83	39,0	39,0	93,0
	No change	15	7,0	7,0	100,0
	Total	213	100,0	100,0	

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025)

**Table 4. Visibility on selo.rs reveals more about what is missing in the current tourist offer?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Much better	121	56,8	56,8	56,8
	Better	79	37,1	37,1	93,9
	No change	13	6,1	6,1	100,0
	Total	213	100,0	100,0	

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025)

Online forums often create opportunities for mentoring with experienced experts in the field. Consequently, they come to know more about professional relations with regard to common projects, resource sharing, and the growth of rural tourism. These programs sometimes cause financial gains for joint endeavors by getting a percentage of the revenues from product sales, sales or subscriptions when a visitor referred from your site purchases a product.

**Table 5. Visibility on selo.rs provides better insight into the existing tourist offer of competitive households?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Much better	119	55,9	55,9	55,9
	Better	81	38,0	38,0	93,9
	No change	13	6,1	6,1	100,0
	Total	213	100,0	100,0	

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025)

**Table 6. Visibility on selo.rs facilitates experience sharing among its members?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Much better	123	57,7	57,7	57,7
	Better	82	38,5	38,5	96,2
	No change	8	3,8	3,8	100,0
	Total	213	100,0	100,0	

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025)

The interaction and involvement with Internet groups also contribute to a great extent to marketing and popularizing rural tourism. In this way, through sites like selo.rs, Instagram and Twitter, operators in tourism can reach a very broad audience to show their individual attractions and experiences to potential visitors. These can again receive a boost from joint efforts in marketing like campaigns together or by some regional tourism initiatives which then stand out to those potential tourists seeking authentic rural experiences. An example is when the owners of a group of inns join to make a seasonal package that emphasizes local attractions, restaurants, and accommodation. On another level, sharing such resources and tools within these networks will place the promotion efforts on a more empowered stance. The actors are not only increasingly visible within rural tourism but it also enhances the feeling that they are part of a larger movement to promote the uniqueness of rural destinations.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The remarkable growth of rural tourism in recent years can be attributed to a combination of changing consumer preferences and the strategic implementation of new technologies. As travelers increasingly seek authentic experiences and connections with nature, rural destinations have become more attractive. The role of digital marketing and social media has enabled these businesses to reach wider audiences and effectively promote their offerings. Furthermore, advancements in operational technologies have allowed rural tourism enterprises to enhance

efficiency, streamline processes, and ultimately deliver a more meaningful experience for visitors. As the sector continues to evolve, the integration of technology will remain essential in sustaining rural tourism's momentum and ensuring that it meets the demands of an ever-changing market.

Rural smart tourism presents a significant opportunity for sustainable destination development, offering a framework that integrates technology, community engagement, and environmental stewardship (Gonzalez-Reverte, 2019). By defining its characteristics and understanding its benefits, stakeholders can harness the potential of this innovative approach to enhance the quality of life for local residents while providing enriching experiences for visitors. However, addressing the challenges associated with technological access, environmental sustainability, and equitable community benefits is critical to ensuring that rural smart tourism fulfills its promise. As rural areas increasingly seek to position themselves in the global tourism market, embracing smart tourism principles can pave the way for a more sustainable and inclusive future, where both local communities and travelers thrive.

The Ministry of Information & Telecommunications has chalked out a comprehensive plan to provide broadband Internet in 700 villages by the end of 2025 through the addition of 4700 km of optical fibers; total connectivity includes 120,000 households and 720 school facilities. This will make it easier, more efficient, and sustainable to produce higher earnings for farmers and a more attractive rural life, especially for young people. Figures speak about the Serbian villages: There are 4700 of them in our country. Out of those, 1200 will cease to exist in the next 15 years. More than 1000 villages have under 100 inhabitants, and over 200 have not a single individual under twenty (year). Agriculture is the biggest chance for the Serbian economy and our Serbian countryside, but not as a rural agriculture, farmers working the fields with modern Information Technologies and Digital Wave technologies.

Digital transformation can be defined as the integration of digital technology into all areas of a business, fundamentally changing how operations are conducted and how value is delivered to customers. In the context of rural tourism, this transformation is especially relevant as it helps address unique challenges faced by these destinations, such as limited marketing budgets and geographical isolation. Historically, rural tourism has thrived on attracting visitors through word-of-mouth and traditional media, but these methods have become insufficient in the digital age. Current trends indicate a significant rise in digital adoption, with rural tourism stakeholders increasingly utilizing websites, social media, and data analytics to reach potential visitors. For instance, the rise of platforms like selo.rs has opened up rural accommodations to a broader audience, allowing previously overlooked regions to flourish economically. This historical evolution, coupled with modern technological advancements, illustrates that digital transformation is not merely a trend but a necessity for the sustainability and growth of rural tourism.

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