DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND THE ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE OF TOURISM SMES: BETWEEN MARKETING VISIBILITY AND PLATFORM DEPENDENCE

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Abstract: *Digital platforms have become one of the most influential forces in contemporary tourism, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises. For many accommodation units, local agencies and tourism service providers, platforms are no longer simple promotional tools, but important economic intermediaries that influence visibility, bookings, reputation and access to demand. This paper examines the double role of digital platforms in the performance of tourism small and medium-sized enterprises. On the one hand, platforms increase market exposure, reduce entry barriers and support faster interaction with domestic and international tourists. On the other hand, they may create economic dependence through commissions, ranking systems, customer data control and limited direct contact between firms and tourists. The article uses a narrative literature review, supported by academic and institutional sources, to discuss the relationship between digital visibility, marketing performance and platform dependence. Its main contribution is the development of a balanced perspective: digital platforms can support the growth of tourism small and medium-sized enterprises only when they are integrated into a broader strategy that also includes direct communication, own digital channels and stronger brand autonomy.*

Keywords: *digital platforms, tourism small and medium-sized enterprises, marketing performance, economic dependence, digital transformation.*
JEL Classification: *L83, M31, O33.*

1. Introduction

In tourism, the first contact between a firm and a potential tourist rarely takes place at the reception desk, in a travel agency office or through a printed catalogue. In many cases, it begins on a screen, through a search result, a platform ranking, a review score, a photo gallery or a price comparison. Before the tourist arrives physically at the destination, the economic relationship has already started digitally. This makes visibility one of the most valuable assets for tourism firms, especially for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), which often compete not only through price or service quality, but also through how easily they can be found, trusted and selected online (Van Nuenen and Scarles, 2021; Zhang et al., 2025).

For tourism SMEs, digital platforms have changed the meaning of market access. A small guesthouse, a family hotel, a local agency or a niche experience provider can appear next to much larger competitors on the same digital shelf. This would have been difficult in a tourism economy dominated by traditional distribution networks, large tour operators and strong international brands. Platforms such as online booking websites, review systems and travel search engines reduce part of this distance by giving smaller firms a place in markets that were previously harder to reach. In this sense, digital platforms do not only promote tourism services. They reorganize the conditions under which small firms enter competition (Cenamor, Parida and Wincent, 2019; OECD, 2024).

The economic relevance of this shift can be observed in recent European data. Eurostat (2026) shows that, in 2025, tourists spent 951.6 million nights in short stay accommodation booked through online platforms in the European Union (EU), representing an increase of

11.4 percent compared with 2024. This volume is important because it suggests that platform based bookings are not a secondary channel anymore. They are part of the normal infrastructure of tourism consumption. Eurostat (2025) also treats short stay accommodation booked through platforms as a distinct statistical area, which confirms that digital intermediation has become relevant not only for marketing practice, but also for the measurement of tourism activity.

However, the growth of platforms creates a more complex situation than a simple story of digital progress. For a tourism SME, being present on a platform can mean more reservations, better exposure and faster access to tourists from other regions or countries. At the same time, this visibility is not fully owned by the firm. It depends on search filters, ranking criteria, reviews, commissions and platform rules. The firm can become more visible, but this visibility is partly rented from an intermediary. This is the central problem of the article: digital platforms help small tourism firms reach the market, but they may also make these firms dependent on the very systems that make them visible.

This tension is especially relevant because many tourism SMEs use digital platforms not as one channel among several, but as their main gateway to demand. When a large share of bookings comes from external intermediaries, the firm's economic performance may improve in the short term, while its strategic autonomy becomes weaker in the long term. More reservations can come together with higher commission costs. Better online exposure can come together with less control over customer data. Stronger reputation can come together with permanent pressure from reviews and ratings. Therefore, the question is not whether platforms are useful. They clearly are. The more important question is how much dependence is created when usefulness becomes necessity (Wang, Liu and Zhang, 2024; Verhoef et al., 2021).

This article proposes the idea of a visibility dependence paradox. The paradox refers to the fact that the same digital platform that helps a tourism SME become visible can also reduce its independence. The firm gains access to demand, but part of this access is controlled by another organization. It reaches more tourists, but the relationship with them may remain mediated. It benefits from digital trust mechanisms, but it also becomes exposed to public ratings and algorithmic ordering. This paradox is useful because it avoids two simplified interpretations. Digital platforms are not only a success story for small firms, but they are also not simply a threat. Their effect depends on how firms use them, what capabilities they develop and how much control they keep over their own market position (Teece, 2018; Succurro, 2026).

From this perspective, the performance of tourism SMEs should not be understood only through the number of bookings generated by platforms. Economic performance also includes the cost of obtaining those bookings, the stability of demand, the control over customer relationships, the ability to encourage direct reservations and the capacity to build a recognizable brand outside the platform. Marketing performance is therefore connected with economic performance. A firm may appear successful because it receives many reservations through a platform, but its real position is weaker if it cannot communicate directly with tourists, collect useful customer information or reduce its dependence on paid intermediation.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how digital platforms influence the marketing and economic performance of tourism SMEs. The article focuses on two connected dimensions. The first dimension concerns the benefits created by platforms, such as visibility, reputation, access to wider markets and booking conversion. The second dimension concerns the risks of dependence, such as commission pressure, reduced control over data, weaker direct communication and vulnerability to platform rules. By putting these two dimensions together, the paper argues that tourism SMEs need a more strategic use of digital platforms, one that combines external visibility with internal digital capabilities (Wang, Liu and Zhang, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025; OECD, 2024).

The contribution of the paper is mainly conceptual. It brings together literature on digital transformation, tourism performance, digital platform participation and SME competitiveness in order to explain why platform presence should not be confused with digital strength. A tourism SME may be visible online without truly controlling its digital development. For this reason, the article argues that the most resilient firms are not necessarily those that use platforms the most, but those that know how to balance platform exposure with their own digital channels, direct communication, customer knowledge and brand identity (Cenamor, Parida and Wincent, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021; Succurro, 2026).

The article is organized as follows. The first section introduces the relevance of digital platforms for tourism SMEs and explains the economic importance of the subject. The second section reviews the literature on digital transformation, tourism SMEs, marketing visibility and platform participation. The third section presents the research methodology, based on a narrative literature review. The fourth section discusses the main results, focusing on both the benefits and the risks generated by digital platforms. The final section presents the main arguments and highlights the need for tourism SMEs to transform platform visibility into a more balanced and autonomous digital strategy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital transformation and tourism small and medium sized enterprises

In the case of tourism small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), digital transformation often starts from a very practical problem: how can a small firm be found by tourists who no longer search for tourism services in the same way as before? For a large hotel group, digitalization may mean complex systems, data departments and integrated customer platforms. For a small guesthouse, a boutique hotel or a local agency, it may begin with something simpler but economically decisive: appearing where tourists already look. This makes digital transformation in tourism SMEs less abstract than in other sectors. It is not only about technology adoption, but about survival inside a market where demand increasingly passes through digital screens (Succurro, 2026; Verhoef et al., 2021).

A tourism SME can be online without being digitally strong. This distinction is important. A firm may have a website, a social media page and a profile on a booking platform, but still depend almost entirely on external systems to attract clients. In such a case, digital presence exists, but digital control remains weak. The firm is visible, yet it does not fully own the channels through which visibility is produced. This is one of the main differences between simple digital adoption and real digital transformation. The first means using tools. The second means changing how the firm creates value, communicates, learns from customers and protects its market position (Verhoef et al., 2021).

For small firms in tourism, this transformation is difficult because resources are limited and daily operations usually come before long term digital planning. A family accommodation unit or a small local operator may not have a person responsible only for marketing, data analysis or online reputation. Very often, the same people who manage reservations, guests, suppliers and complaints also manage the digital presence of the firm.

This creates a specific vulnerability: tourism SMEs are pushed to compete in a highly digital market, but they often do so with limited time, limited knowledge and limited financial capacity. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also notes that small tourism firms face barriers related to skills, finance, infrastructure and the capacity to adapt to rapid technological change (OECD, 2024).

This is why platforms became so attractive. They offer small tourism firms something that would be difficult to build independently: traffic, credibility, booking infrastructure, review systems and access to consumers from different markets. For a small firm, joining a platform may seem more realistic than creating its own complete digital ecosystem. The platform becomes a shortcut to demand. However, this shortcut is not neutral. It solves the visibility problem by placing the firm inside another organization's commercial space. In other words, the firm obtains access, but access comes through rules, rankings and costs that it does not fully control (Cenamor, Parida and Wincent, 2019; Wang, Liu and Zhang, 2024).

The literature suggests that the real benefit of digital participation appears when firms do more than simply register on a platform. Wang, Liu and Zhang (2024) show that digital platform participation can improve performance when it supports organizational learning and marketing capability. This idea is especially useful for tourism SMEs because it shows that the platform itself is not the entire solution. What matters is what the firm learns from its digital activity: which photos attract attention, which services are praised, which complaints repeat, which prices work better and which types of tourists respond to the offer. From this point of view, a platform is not only a sales channel. It can also become a source of market intelligence.

Economic performance should therefore be understood in a broader way. For a tourism SME, the question is not only whether digital tools increase bookings, but whether they help the firm build a more stable position. A higher number of reservations may be useful, but it does not automatically mean stronger competitiveness if the firm pays high commissions, loses direct contact with tourists or cannot transform one time bookings into loyal customers. Succurro (2026) connects digital transformation in tourism SMEs with outcomes such as turnover and employment growth, but the managerial meaning of this connection depends on how digitalization is integrated into the firm's strategy. Digital growth that depends entirely on external platforms can remain fragile.

A more mature interpretation of digital transformation in tourism SMEs must therefore include both access and autonomy. Access refers to the firm's capacity to reach tourists through digital channels. Autonomy refers to the firm's capacity to keep some control over its brand, customer relationships, data and pricing decisions. Many discussions about digitalization focus mainly on access, because access is easier to observe. A firm becomes visible, receives bookings and appears more competitive. However, autonomy is just as important, because it determines whether this visibility can be converted into long term value. This is where digital transformation becomes a strategic issue, not only a marketing issue (Teece, 2018; Verhoef et al., 2021).

2.2 Digital platforms, marketing visibility and firm performance

Tourism is a market of promises sold before they are experienced. A tourist usually pays for a room, a destination or an experience before knowing exactly how it will feel. Because of this, digital signals have become extremely influential. Photos, descriptions, ratings, guest comments, response speed and platform position often replace direct knowledge. For a small tourism firm, these signals can create trust before any personal interaction takes place. This is why marketing visibility in tourism is not just about being seen. It is about being seen in a context where the tourist feels confident enough to choose (Van Nuenen and Scarles, 2021).

Digital platforms are powerful because they combine attention, comparison and transaction in the same place. A traditional advertisement may inform the tourist, but a platform allows the tourist to compare prices, read reviews, check availability and book immediately. This changes the role of marketing. Promotion is no longer separated from purchase. The tourist does not move from information to decision through different channels in a slow and linear way. The decision can be made inside the same digital space where the firm is discovered. For tourism SMEs, this can be a major advantage because platforms reduce the distance between visibility and revenue (Eurostat, 2025; Eurostat, 2026).

Recent data confirms the economic size of this phenomenon. Eurostat (2026) reports that 951.6 million nights were spent in short stay accommodation booked through online platforms in the European Union (EU) in 2025. This figure matters because it shows that platform mediated tourism is not a niche behaviour limited to young or highly digital consumers. It has become a large scale market practice. For SMEs, this means that platform presence is no longer optional in many segments of accommodation and tourism services. Not being visible on digital platforms can mean being absent from a large part of contemporary demand.

Still, visibility on a platform is a different kind of visibility from visibility through an own website or a direct customer relationship. On a platform, the firm is visible together with many competitors, under a structure designed by the intermediary. The tourist sees the firm through filters, rankings, prices, review scores and photos arranged in a particular interface. This means that the firm is not only presenting itself. It is being presented by the platform. The difference is important because it shows that platform marketing is not fully controlled by the tourism SME. The firm contributes content and service quality, but the platform controls much of the environment in which these are interpreted.

This explains why platform participation can improve performance and create vulnerability at the same time. Wang, Liu and Zhang (2024) argue that participation in digital platforms can support the performance of bed and breakfast businesses, especially through learning and marketing capabilities. However, the same mechanism can also increase dependence if the firm becomes unable to generate demand outside the platform. A high rating may bring reservations, but it also makes the firm sensitive to every public evaluation. A better ranking may increase sales, but it also makes the firm dependent on criteria that can change. A platform profile may bring foreign tourists, but it may also weaken the habit of direct booking.

The issue is not that platforms are harmful. The problem is that their benefits can hide their costs. Commission fees are visible and easy to calculate, but other costs are less obvious. These include weaker brand recognition outside the platform, limited access to customer data, reduced direct communication and the risk of competing mainly through price and rating. A tourism SME may appear successful because it is fully booked through platforms, but its strategic position may still be weak if it cannot attract tourists independently. In this situation, the platform does not only sell the firm's services. It becomes the firm's main route to the market.

Cenamor, Parida and Wincent (2019) show that small and medium sized enterprises can compete through digital platforms when they develop platform related capabilities together with other strategic capabilities. This point is essential for tourism. A small firm should not treat the platform as a substitute for strategy. It should treat it as one element of a broader market approach. Platform visibility is useful when it is connected with a stronger website, better communication, improved service design, direct customer retention and clearer brand positioning. Without these complementary elements, the firm may grow in volume but remain dependent in structure.

The broader digital economy literature helps explain this situation. Teece (2018) argues that profiting from innovation in the digital economy depends not only on using technologies, but also on controlling complementary assets and business models. Applied to tourism SMEs, this means that the value of platform participation depends on what the firm controls outside the platform. If the firm controls only the service, while the platform controls visibility, data, ranking and customer access, then the distribution of value becomes uneven. The firm performs the hospitality work, but the intermediary controls a large part of the market interface.

For this reason, marketing performance and economic performance must be analysed together. A tourism SME may improve its marketing indicators, such as visibility, reviews and booking conversion, while also increasing its economic dependence. This dual movement is the key idea of the article. Digital platforms do not simply make small firms stronger or weaker. They create a new type of performance that must be managed carefully. The most competitive tourism SMEs are likely to be those that use platforms to gain visibility, but also transform that visibility into direct relationships, repeat demand and stronger brand autonomy (Zhang et al., 2025; Succurro, 2026).

3. Research Methodology

This paper is based on a review of the specialized literature and on institutional data provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Eurostat. The analysis uses academic articles focused on digital transformation, digital platforms, tourism small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), marketing performance and economic performance.

The selected sources were mainly published between 2018 and 2026 and were identified through academic platforms such as ScienceDirect, SpringerLink and Sage Journals. The institutional sources were used to provide recent economic context regarding tourism digitalization and the growth of online platform based accommodation bookings in the European Union (EU).

The reviewed sources were organized around two main directions. The first direction refers to the benefits of digital platforms for tourism SMEs, especially online visibility, access to demand, reputation and booking conversion. The second direction refers to the risks of platform dependence, especially commissions, algorithmic ranking, reduced control over customer data and weaker direct communication with tourists. This structure supports the main argument of the article: digital platforms can improve the performance of tourism SMEs, but only when they are used as part of a broader and more autonomous digital strategy.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Digital platforms as visibility accelerators for tourism small and medium sized enterprises

The reviewed literature shows that digital platforms are important for tourism small and medium sized enterprises because they reduce one of the most difficult barriers in tourism: being noticed by potential clients. A small accommodation unit or a local travel service provider may not have the budget to build international recognition, but it can become visible on platforms where tourists are already searching. This changes the competitive position of small firms, because access to demand is no longer based only on physical location, traditional promotion or partnerships with large intermediaries (Cenamor, Parida and Wincent, 2019; OECD, 2024).

The first major result is that platforms transform visibility into a practical economic resource. In tourism, visibility is not only a communication advantage. It can directly influence bookings, occupancy, reputation and revenue. The data provided by Eurostat confirms the economic scale of this process. In 2025, online platforms generated almost one billion nights in short stay accommodation in the European Union, which shows that platform based demand has become part of the normal structure of tourism consumption (Eurostat, 2026). Therefore, for many tourism small and medium sized enterprises, platform presence is not just a marketing choice, but a condition for participating in a large part of contemporary tourism demand.

Digital platforms also support trust. Tourism services are bought before they are fully experienced, which means that tourists rely heavily on digital signs before making a decision. Reviews, ratings, response speed, photos and ranking position become part of the perceived quality of the offer. For small firms, this can be valuable because a good online reputation can compensate for the absence of a famous brand. A guesthouse, for example, can attract international tourists not because it is widely known, but because its platform profile creates enough confidence for the tourist to book (Van Nuenen and Scarles, 2021; Wang, Liu and Zhang, 2024).

Another result is that platforms can become learning environments. They do not only bring reservations, but also generate information. Reviews show what tourists appreciate or criticize. Search behaviour indicates what clients compare. Booking patterns reveal periods of higher or lower demand. This information can help managers adjust prices, improve service presentation, respond to complaints and adapt the offer. Wang, Liu and Zhang (2024) show that digital platform participation can support performance when it improves marketing capability and organizational learning.

However, the benefit is stronger when the firm uses platforms actively, not passively. A passive firm only waits for reservations. An active firm improves photos, updates descriptions, answers reviews, studies demand patterns, tests prices and tries to redirect satisfied clients toward direct communication in the future. In this sense, the platform is useful only when it becomes part of a wider managerial process. Digital transformation is therefore not the same as being listed online. It requires the capacity to transform platform visibility into better decisions, stronger reputation and more stable economic results (Succurro, 2026; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Table no. 1. Main benefits of digital platforms for tourism small and medium sized enterprises

Benefit	Explanation	Economic relevance
Online visibility	The firm appears where tourists already search for accommodation or tourism services.	Higher probability of being discovered by domestic and international tourists.
Access to demand	Platforms connect small firms with larger markets without requiring complex distribution systems.	Potential increase in bookings, occupancy and sales.
Digital reputation	Reviews and ratings help tourists evaluate the service before consumption.	Trust can be created even without a strong traditional brand.
Booking conversion	Tourists can search, compare and reserve in the same digital space.	The distance between promotion and purchase becomes shorter.
Market learning	Reviews, rankings and booking behaviour provide useful information.	Managers can adjust prices, services and communication more quickly.
Competitive presence	Small firms can appear near larger competitors on the same platform.	The firm can participate in markets that were previously harder to access.

Source: Author's synthesis based on Wang, Liu and Zhang (2024), Cenamor, Parida and Wincent (2019), OECD (2024) and Eurostat (2026).

4.2 Platform dependence as an economic vulnerability

The second major result is that the same platforms that increase visibility can also create dependence. This is the central tension of the article. Tourism small and medium sized enterprises may become more visible, but this visibility is often controlled by external intermediaries. A firm can receive many bookings through a platform, but the conditions of this visibility depend on ranking systems, commissions, reviews, filters and commercial rules that the firm does not fully control. Therefore, the platform does not only distribute demand. It also shapes the way demand reaches the firm.

This creates a specific economic vulnerability. If a large share of reservations comes from one or two platforms, the firm's performance becomes sensitive to changes made outside the firm. A modification in ranking logic, a higher commission, a negative review or a change in platform policy can affect bookings quickly. In traditional marketing, a firm could control more directly its communication channels. In platform based tourism, the firm often operates inside an environment designed by another organization. This weakens strategic autonomy, even when short term sales improve (Teece, 2018; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Commission pressure is one of the most visible forms of dependence. Platforms can increase demand, but they also capture part of the value created by the tourism firm. This means that growth through platforms may not have the same profitability as growth through direct bookings. A small accommodation unit may have high occupancy, but if a significant part of its reservations comes through commission based intermediaries, the final economic benefit can be lower than it appears. For this reason, performance should not be measured only by the number of bookings, but also by the cost of obtaining those bookings.

Another risk is the weakening of the direct relationship with tourists. When the booking, communication and review process are mainly mediated by platforms, the firm may have limited control over customer data and future communication. This makes it harder to build loyalty, encourage repeat visits or develop personalized offers outside the platform. In the long term, this can reduce the firm's capacity to create its own customer base. The tourism small and medium sized enterprise remains active in the market, but the relationship with demand is partly owned by the intermediary.

Algorithmic visibility is also a major issue. On a platform, being present does not automatically mean being noticed. The position of a firm depends on criteria that may include price, reviews, response time, availability, paid visibility and other platform specific indicators. A firm can improve its service quality and still lose visibility if it does not match the logic of the platform. This creates a form of competition that is not fully transparent. Tourism firms compete not only with each other, but also for a favourable position inside the digital architecture of the platform (Van Nuenen and Scarles, 2021; Zhang et al., 2025).

Beyond these visible risks, platform dependence also changes the way tourism small and medium sized enterprises understand their own performance. A firm may believe that it is becoming stronger because reservations increase, but this growth can be fragile if it depends almost entirely on a platform environment. In this situation, the platform does not only bring clients; it also defines how the firm is discovered, compared, evaluated and sometimes even priced. This is why dependence should not be understood only as a financial issue related to commissions. It is also a strategic issue related to control. The more a tourism SME depends on external platforms for visibility, customer contact and reputation, the less it can shape its own market position independently. Therefore, the main risks of platform dependence can be grouped around several dimensions, as shown in table no. 2.

Table no. 2. Main risks of platform dependence for tourism small and medium sized enterprises

Risk	Description	Economic effect	Possible managerial response
Commission dependence	The firm pays a fee for each reservation generated through the platform.	Revenue may increase, but profitability can be reduced if most bookings come through intermediaries.	Increase the share of direct bookings through own website, loyal clients and post stay communication.
Algorithmic visibility	The firm's position depends on platform ranking criteria, such as reviews, prices, availability and response time.	Demand can become unstable because visibility may change without full control from the firm.	Monitor platform performance, but avoid relying on one channel only.
Weak direct relationship	The tourist interacts mainly with the platform before, during or after the booking process.	The firm may lose opportunities to build loyalty and repeat demand.	Encourage direct contact after the stay through newsletters, feedback forms and loyalty incentives.

Risk	Description	Economic effect	Possible managerial response
Limited customer data	The platform controls important information about users, search behaviour and booking patterns.	The firm has less capacity to understand its own clients and personalize future offers.	Build internal customer databases where legally and ethically possible.
Reputation pressure	Reviews and ratings strongly influence how tourists evaluate the firm before purchase.	A small number of negative reviews can affect demand, prices and perceived quality.	Respond professionally to reviews and use complaints as service improvement signals.
Price comparison pressure	Platforms place many similar offers next to each other, making price differences very visible.	Firms may be pushed to compete through lower prices instead of brand value or service quality.	Differentiate the offer through experience, service design and added value, not only price.
Reduced strategic autonomy	The firm depends on external rules, commissions, visibility mechanisms and platform policies.	Business decisions become influenced by the interests and rules of the intermediary.	Combine platform use with own brand, social media, direct sales channels and stronger digital capabilities.
Brand dilution	The tourist may remember the platform more than the individual tourism firm.	The firm can receive bookings without building a strong independent market identity.	Strengthen brand identity through own website, visual style, storytelling and direct communication.

Source**:** Author's synthesis based on Teece (2018), Verhoef et al. (2021), Wang, Liu and Zhang (2024) and Zhang et al. (2025).

Table no. 3. Recent economic indicators of platform based tourism in the European Union

Indicator	Value	Interpretation
Nights booked through online platforms in the European Union, 2025	951.6 million nights	Platform based accommodation has become a large part of tourism demand, not a marginal online channel.
Growth compared with 2024	11.4%	The use of platforms continued to expand from one year to another.
Growth compared with 2023	32.4%	The increase shows the rapid consolidation of online platform based tourism consumption.
Nights booked in the fourth quarter of 2025	172.3 million nights	Platform demand remained significant even outside the main summer season.
Growth in the fourth quarter of	10.9%	The annual growth trend was also visible at

Indicator	Value	Interpretation
2025 compared with the fourth quarter of 2024		quarterly level.

Source: Author's synthesis based on Eurostat (2026).

The data presented in table no. 3 helps move the discussion from a purely managerial level to an economic one. Platform dependence matters because the market itself is increasingly organized through online intermediaries. When almost one billion nights are booked through digital platforms in the European Union in a single year, platforms are no longer only places where firms advertise their services. They become part of the infrastructure through which tourism demand is distributed, measured and transformed into revenue (Eurostat, 2026). For tourism small and medium sized enterprises, this means that visibility on platforms is directly connected with market access, occupancy and economic performance (OECD, 2024; Succurro, 2026).

At the same time, these figures also make the risk of dependence more visible. A growing platform based market can create important opportunities for small firms, but it can also increase the pressure to remain present, competitive and well ranked inside the platform environment. The problem is not that platforms are used. In the current tourism economy, this is almost unavoidable. The problem appears when a firm depends on platforms so strongly that commissions, ranking rules, reviews and access to customer data begin to shape its entire commercial position (Wang, Liu and Zhang, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025).

This is where the visibility dependence paradox becomes useful. Digital platforms open the market for tourism small and medium sized enterprises, but they also mediate this market. They bring tourists closer, but not always directly. They increase exposure, but the firm does not fully own that exposure. They can improve performance, but they can also capture part of the value, information and customer relationship generated by the firm. Therefore, platform visibility should be understood as a powerful resource, but also as a resource that must be managed carefully (Teece, 2018; Verhoef et al., 2021).

The practical implication is that tourism small and medium sized enterprises should not reject digital platforms, because this would be unrealistic. Instead, they should avoid using them as the only route to demand. A more balanced approach would combine platform presence with direct booking tools, an updated website, social media communication, post stay contact, customer databases, loyalty incentives and a clearer brand identity. The purpose is not to replace platforms, but to transform the visibility obtained through them into stronger direct relationships and more autonomous marketing capabilities (Cenamor, Parida and Wincent, 2019; Wang, Liu and Zhang, 2024).

Therefore, the main result of the article is that digital platforms improve performance only when they are used strategically. They are useful when they increase visibility, support learning and help firms reach tourists that would otherwise be difficult to access. They become risky when the firm loses control over costs, data, communication and long term market positioning. For tourism small and medium sized enterprises, the real challenge is not choosing between platforms and independence, but building enough internal digital capability to benefit from platforms without becoming fully dependent on them (Succurro, 2026; OECD, 2024).

5. Final Remarks

This article analysed the role of digital platforms in the marketing and economic performance of tourism small and medium sized enterprises. The main argument is that platforms should not be understood only as promotional tools. They are also economic intermediaries that influence visibility, bookings, reputation, customer access and the distribution of value in tourism markets. For small firms, this role is especially important because platforms can offer access to demand that would otherwise be difficult to reach through traditional marketing channels.

The analysis showed that digital platforms create a double effect. On the one hand, they help tourism small and medium sized enterprises become more visible, reach wider markets, receive online reviews and transform tourist interest into reservations. On the other hand, they may create dependence through commissions, ranking systems, limited customer data, review pressure and weaker direct communication with tourists. This is why the article proposed the idea of the visibility dependence paradox: the same platform that increases the firm's visibility can also reduce its strategic autonomy.

From a managerial point of view, the solution is not to avoid platforms. In the current tourism economy, such a strategy would be unrealistic, especially considering the strong growth of platform based bookings in the European Union. The more relevant solution is to use platforms as an entry point, not as the only route to the market. Tourism small and medium sized enterprises should combine platform presence with their own websites, direct booking systems, social media communication, customer databases, loyalty actions and stronger brand identity. In this way, platform visibility can be transformed into a more stable and autonomous market position.

The article also highlights that digital transformation is not equal to simple platform presence. A firm can be listed online without having a real digital strategy. Sustainable performance appears when firms are able to learn from digital interactions, understand customer behaviour, manage online reputation and reduce excessive dependence on external intermediaries. Therefore, digital platforms improve performance mainly when they are used strategically and supported by internal digital capabilities (Wang, Liu and Zhang, 2024; Succurro, 2026; OECD, 2024).

Future research could develop this topic through empirical studies focused on tourism small and medium sized enterprises from specific destinations or countries. For example, future studies could compare firms that depend mainly on platforms with firms that combine platforms and direct booking channels. Another useful direction would be to analyse how commission levels, review scores, ranking position and direct booking shares influence profitability. Qualitative research based on interviews with hotel managers, guesthouse owners or local tourism agencies could also provide a deeper understanding of how small firms experience platform dependence in daily business practice.

Overall, the article concludes that digital platforms are neither a complete solution nor a simple threat for tourism small and medium sized enterprises. Their value depends on how they are used. When platforms are treated as one element of a broader digital strategy, they can support visibility, learning and economic performance. When they become the only source of demand, they may weaken autonomy and increase vulnerability. The real challenge for tourism small and medium sized enterprises is therefore to benefit from platform access while gradually building their own digital strength.

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