

**PROMOTION OF THE TOURISM SECTOR BY ADOPTING EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT.
CASE STUDY: MEHEDINȚI COUNTY**

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***Abstract:** The tourism sector plays a vital role in regional economic development, and the promotion of lesser-known destinations can be significantly enhanced through effective digital strategies. This paper examines the promotion of Mehedinți County, a culturally rich yet under-explored region in Romania, through online marketing strategies. Key findings highlight the importance of targeted digital content that resonates with potential tourists, the role of local communities in content creation, and the impact of virtual experiences in sparking interest. The paper also explores the need for collaboration between local authorities, businesses, and digital marketing professionals to create a cohesive and sustainable online tourism brand for Mehedinți, and also this study provides practical recommendations for enhancing the county's online presence, boosting tourism demand, and fostering long-term economic growth through effective digital promotion strategies.*

***Key words:** tourism, communication, social media, online environment, public relations*

INTRODUCTION

The development of the tourist sector in Mehedinți county represents an extraordinary opportunity for the economic and cultural revitalization of the region. This area, with impressive natural landscapes, authentic traditions and a rich historical heritage, has a huge tourism potential, which unfortunately is not fully exploited. The choice of this topic for the dissertation emphasizes the importance of integrating sustainable development strategies that attract tourists from both the country and abroad.

One of the essential aspects in the development of the tourist sector in Mehedinți county is the infrastructure. The improvement of roads, means of transport and accommodation facilities can make this region an attractive destination for tourists keen to explore the natural beauty and local culture. Also, the promotion of ecological and cultural tourism could bring added value, offering visitors authentic and sustainable experiences.

In addition to the obvious economic benefits, the development of tourism can also contribute to the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage of this county. Education and public awareness programs can play a crucial role in protecting the environment and local traditions. Thus, the choice of this topic for the dissertation not only highlights an aspect of major interest for the region, but also suggests concrete solutions for its improvement and promotion, contributing to a sustainable and prosperous future for Mehedinți. [1]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the theoretical concepts surrounding tourism marketing and the practical application of digital strategies in Mehedinți county we used several research methods. Firstly we made a literature review in order to establish a theoretical foundation for the study, providing context and understanding of existing research and strategies in the tourism sector, especially in terms

of online promotion. Also we used Comparative Analysis to compare the strategies used in Mehedinți to identify best practices for improvement.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Public relations efforts in the tourism sector are essential for showcasing destinations and drawing in travelers. These campaigns typically focus on emphasizing the unique qualities of a location, such as its breathtaking natural scenery, vibrant cultural history, or distinctive recreational offerings. Through a variety of communication platforms, such as traditional media, social media, and partnerships with influencers, PR campaigns are able to craft a captivating and persuasive portrayal of a travel destination.

Table 1.

Available Tourist Accommodation Capacity by Types of Tourist Reception Structures in Mehedinți County

Tipuri de structuri	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021	2022	2023
	Capacity/Places									
Hotels	1243	1223	1103	797	836	1072	1083	1157	1129	1037
Hotels for youth	0	0	0	31	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hostels	0	0	0	20	281	334	347	347	347	347
Apartments and rooms for rent	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	520	704	830
Inns and motels	362	337	320	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Motels	0	0	0	95	74	43	67	67	67	21
Tourist villas	400	0	0	0	34	0	48	48	48	42
Tourist cabins	110	0	0	0	0	0	10	10	10	10
Bungalows	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	10	10	10
Campgrounds	12	40	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	50
Tourist cottages	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	8	24
Camps for students and preschoolers	0	275	435	170	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tourist guesthouses	0	0	0	38	123	279	266	266	266	234
Agritourism pensions	0	0	0	13	176	390	830	928	1032	1048

Source: <http://tempo-online>

In Mehedinți County, hotels are a primary form of accommodation, with the majority situated in larger cities like Drobeta-Turnu Severin (Table 1.). These hotels vary, ranging from high-end establishments equipped with modern amenities and comprehensive services to more affordable, modest options offering comfortable stays. In addition, guesthouses and villas are highly favored, particularly in rural and mountainous regions. These accommodations provide a more intimate and authentic experience, often run by locals who offer insights into the area's traditions and culture. Mehedinți also boasts campgrounds and cabins, perfect for nature lovers and adventurers. These campsites are typically located in scenic areas, close to natural attractions such as the Iron Gates Natural Park, lakes, and rivers. Mountain cabins cater to tourists interested in hiking and appreciating the peaceful and stunning mountain landscapes. Additionally, there are agrotourism accommodations where guests can immerse themselves in rural life, engage in traditional farming activities, and sample local products. Mehedinți County offers a diverse selection of accommodations, ranging from contemporary hotels to rural guesthouses, campsites, and mountain cabins, each contributing to a unique and enriching tourism experience. These options are designed to suit various tastes and budgets, ensuring a comfortable and enjoyable stay in this beautiful Romanian region.

In recent years, there has been a notable rise in the rental of tourist apartments in Mehedinți County, with the number of such rentals doubling in 2023 compared to 2021.

This trend can be attributed to several factors, including the region's economic development, infrastructure investments, and the growing interest of tourists in visiting this area. Additionally, the increase in rental apartments may reflect a shift in tourists' preferences, with many opting for apartment rentals over hotels or guesthouses. This trend is also evident in other counties across Romania, driven by the flexibility and lower startup costs associated with rental properties. In response, real estate developers have been building new residential complexes and upgrading existing ones, resulting in a more varied and competitive accommodation market.

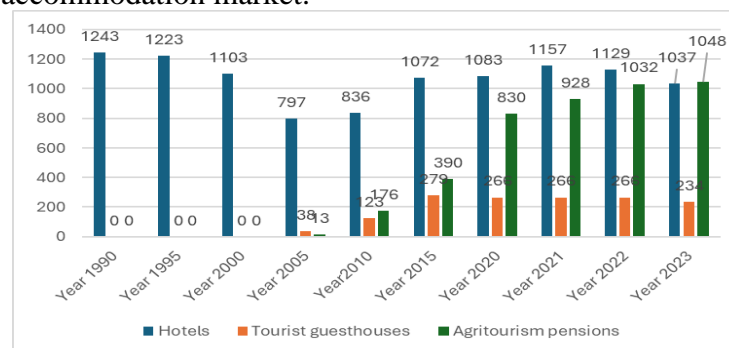


Figure 1. The evolution of accommodation capacity in Mehedinți County

Over the past few decades, Mehedinți County's accommodation capacity has undergone notable changes (Figure 1.), reflecting shifts in tourist preferences and the expansion of tourism infrastructure. In 1990, there were 1,243 hotels, but by 2023, that number had decreased to 1,037. This reduction is linked to the increasing diversity of lodging options and changes in the tourism sector, where travelers are increasingly seeking authentic and personalized experiences.

Conversely, the number of tourist guesthouses has experienced substantial growth. In 2005, the county had only 38 tourist guesthouses, but by 2023, their number had surged to 234. This rise is attributed to the demand for more intimate, local experiences and the support from authorities and investors in promoting rural and eco-tourism. The most remarkable growth has been seen in agro-tourism guesthouses. From just 13 in 2005, their numbers reached 390 by 2015, and by 2023, they had soared to 1,048. This dramatic increase reflects the growing popularity of agro-tourism, allowing tourists to engage in rural life, partake in agricultural activities, and savor traditional local products. This trend not only boosts the region's economy but also aids in preserving local traditions and cultural heritage. The monthly accommodation capacity in the South-West Oltenia region varies widely, highlighting the region's diverse tourism offerings. Vâlcea County stands out for its high number of accommodation options, making it a major tourist destination (Table 2.). The county offers an extensive array of accommodations, including hotels, guesthouses, cabins, and villas, catering to different preferences and budgets.

Vâlcea County's well-developed tourist reception infrastructure is driven by the area's natural and cultural attractions, such as spa resorts, caves, monasteries, and natural parks. Băile Olănești Resort, known for its mineral waters and treatment services, draws thousands of visitors each year, offering a variety of accommodation and therapeutic options. Similarly, the Călimănești-Căciulata Resort, famous for its thermal waters and stunning landscapes, significantly contributes to the county's expanding accommodation capacity.

A Facebook page can be an excellent method for promoting accommodation units in Mehedinți County due to the many advantages this platform offers.

Table 2.
Available Tourist Accommodation Capacity by Types of Tourist Reception Structures in Mehedinți County

Macro-regions, development regions and counties	January 2010	December 2010	January 2015	December 2015	January 2020	December 2020	January 2023	December 2023	January 2024	April 2024
	UM: Locuri- zile									
SW OLTENIA	268487	354075	441978	459519	526847	458395	562066	605979	575214	597687
Dolj	43400	52185	65793	68794	89015	63011	71028	80416	79741	77452
Gorj	43958	45539	67983	58549	83997	79387	100973	108314	106020	90520
Mehedinti	33647	42749	40889	51932	43927	36022	45415	50406	43493	56730
Olt	15066	16988	27249	25110	24924	27869	49941	34317	29295	25710
Valcea	132416	196614	240064	255134	284984	252106	294709	332526	316665	347275

Source: <http://tempo-online>

First, Facebook allows the creation of a virtual community around the accommodation unit, where potential clients can interact directly with owners and other guests. Page administrators can post regular updates about services, rates, special offers, and local events, keeping the audience engaged and interested.

Additionally, using Facebook's advertising features can significantly increase the visibility of accommodation units. Through well-targeted advertising campaigns, owners can reach a wide and diverse audience, including tourists from other counties or countries. Facebook Ads enables audience segmentation based on interests, location, age, and other demographic criteria, ensuring that Mehedinți's accommodation units attract the exact type of tourists they aim for. Lastly, customer reviews and testimonials play a crucial role in building a positive image. Satisfied guests can leave comments and ratings on the Facebook page, providing credibility and trust to potential new clients. At the same time, page administrators can respond promptly to visitors' questions and concerns, demonstrating active commitment to customer satisfaction. Thus, a well-managed Facebook page can be a powerful marketing tool for accommodation units in Mehedinți County, enhancing visibility and attracting more tourists.

Analysis of the graph regarding the evolution of the number of posts on the Facebook pages of the two accommodation units, Nest Restaurant and Accommodation and Conacul Boierului (Figure 2.), indicates a general increase in activity in 2023 compared to 2022. This overall growth can be interpreted as a sign of increased interest in online promotion, possibly reflecting both a more aggressive marketing strategy and an adaptation to current industry trends.

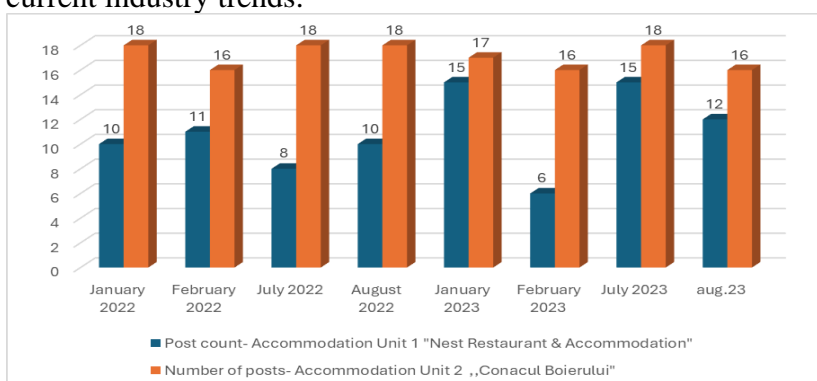


Figure 2. The evolution of the number of posts on the Facebook pages of the analyzed accommodation units

In the case of Nest Restaurant and Accommodation, the increase in the number of posts can be attributed to the desire to attract a wider audience and maintain constant contact with both current and potential customers. Frequent posts may include updates about special events, promotional offers, or customer feedback, all contributing to increased visibility and brand consolidation.

On the other hand, Conacul Boierului seems to follow a similar strategy, using the Facebook platform to increase its online presence. It is possible that the unit has invested in quality content and paid advertising campaigns to differentiate itself from the competition and attract a larger number of visitors. This growth in social media activity may also indicate a recognition of the importance of direct communication with customers through digital platforms.

CONCLUSIONS

To attract tourists to Nest Restaurant & Accommodation through online Facebook campaigns, it is essential for the unit to focus on a few key strategies that highlight the uniqueness and appeal of the location. Here are three ideas for effective campaigns:

1. "Genuine Adventures at the Nest" Campaign:

This campaign can focus on showcasing the unique experiences tourists can have at Nest Restaurant & Accommodation. Posts can include photos and videos of traditional dishes made with local ingredients, interviews with chefs talking about special recipes, and testimonials from satisfied tourists. Additionally, contests can be organized where participants share their own authentic experiences at Nest, with attractive prizes such as free meals or accommodation discounts.

2. "Affordable Vacation Packages" Campaign:

To attract tourists looking for good deals, this campaign can promote special vacation packages offered by Nest. Posts can include details about weekend packages, group discounts, offers for couples, or holiday packages. It's important to highlight included benefits, such as free meals, access to relaxation facilities, or guided tours in the area. Using appealing images and detailed descriptions will help capture the attention of potential tourists.

3. "Explore the Charm of Local Treasures" Campaign:

This campaign can emphasize tourist attractions near Nest Restaurant & Accommodation. Posts can include guides and recommendations for exploring local landmarks, such as hiking trails, museums, castles, or other points of interest. High-quality photos and videos, along with captivating stories about local history and culture, will encourage tourists to choose Nest as the starting point for their adventures. Additionally, online events like virtual tours or live sessions with local guides can offer a taste of the experience before the actual visit.

Implementing these campaigns on Facebook, with careful planning and relevant content, will help Nest Restaurant & Accommodation attract more tourists and strengthen its reputation as a top destination. The proposal for the campaign to attract tourists to Conacul Boierului on Facebook and Instagram focuses on highlighting the uniqueness and authentic charm of the location, as well as creating an emotional connection with potential visitors. The campaign will include engaging posts, captivating stories, and direct interactions with the target audience. In the first phase, the development of high-quality visual content should be prioritized, including professional photos and videos that capture the elegant and historic atmosphere of the manor. These materials will be accompanied by evocative descriptions that emphasize the unique experiences tourists can have at Conacul Boierului, such as strolls through lush gardens, tastings of local wines, and cultural events.

Relevant hashtags and geotags will be used to increase the visibility of posts. In the second phase, a series of contests and special offers should be implemented to stimulate interaction and audience engagement. For example, a photography contest could be organized where participants post images from their vacations at Conacul Boierului, with attractive prizes for the best shots. The accommodation unit could also offer discounts on bookings for those who share and comment on our posts. Feedback should be continuously monitored, and active interaction with followers should be encouraged to build a loyal and enthusiastic community.

Finally, collaboration with influencers and travel bloggers should be pursued to increase the manor's visibility. They would be invited to spend a weekend at Conacul Boierului and share their authentic experiences with their followers. This way, the accommodation unit will benefit from their exposure and attract a new wave of tourists interested in unique destinations and authentic experiences. The campaign will be constantly evaluated to adapt the strategy based on results and ensure maximum impact.

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