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Digital skills among students in tourism and hospitality studies: the case of North Macedonia

ASST. PROF. CVETANKA RISTOVA MAGLOVSKA

Abstract

As technology progressively influences daily life, the tourism and hospitality industries are integrating digital technologies to meet tourists' expectations. Consequently, digital skills are becoming progressively essential as the workplace evolves. Businesses consistently seek employees with these competencies, increasing the demand for knowledge in digital skills. The industry's digital need is evident, leading to the expanding value of digital workers. Employers are advocating for upgraded skills, resulting in today's job seekers requiring specialized skills to help them stand out from the crowd. While some certain universities and other educational institutions have modified or expanded the curriculum to address the increasing demand for digital skills, there is a pressing need for research to assess the growth of digital skills among students in tourism and hospitality studies, with them being the main providers of tourism services in the industry. This research, not previously conducted solely on students enrolled in tourism and hospitality studies in North Macedonia, aims to present findings on digital skills among students at the Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics by identifying levels of digital skills. For this, a quantitative methodology was used through the application of a survey amongst 100 students at undergraduate studies.

Keywords: digital skills, hospitality, students, tourism, workplace.

Introduction

For many businesses within the tourism and hospitality industry, adapting to a digital environment had already become a high priority, even before the global pandemic (Yepez & Leimgruber, 2024). But nowadays, to stay competitive in today's economy, the tourism and hospitality industry is rapidly evolving by adopting digital technologies that are transforming business operations and offering numerous benefits, such as increased productivity, greater efficiency, and better guest interactions (Rusavska et al., 2024). In turn, by leveraging these advancements, digital skills have become a significant and even more essential need for hotel employees (Pshenichnykh & Novi, 2023); therefore, students who aim to pursue careers in tourism and hospitality cannot overstate the importance of possessing digital skills, as the industry heavily relies on digital solutions for communication, efficiency, and service delivery.

As was already indicated, digital skills are now an essential need for job employees, rather than a choice (Stofkova et al., 2022). This tendency is a result of digital technology's fast development and change not only in the workplace but in our everyday life as well (Kappeler, 2024). Therefore, students, i.e., hotel employees, who possess knowledge and experience in digital skills may find it easier to perform their necessary job duties. Universities and other educational institutions play a key role in equipping students with the necessary digital skills (Kayyali, 2024; Chanda et al., 2024) which can include a general understanding of basic technology to complete work tasks or abilities that relate to the tourism and hospitality industry, such as computer software and applications, digital devices, or guest-facing activities (Mandalia, 2023). Also, the proper curricula with the adequate learning and training of students in digital skills can help them enhance their career prospects and stay competitive in the job market (Kayyali, 2024).

This paper aims to explore the current state of digital skills among students in tourism and hospitality studies in North Macedonia and later classify them according to the classification established by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) as no skills, low, basic (intermediate), and above basic (advanced) skills (International Telecommunications Union, 2018). To do so, the level of competence classification will be done on the five competence areas in the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp) (European Commission, n.d.). Furthermore, the paper will highlight the importance of integrating digital skills into academic curricula and propose recommendations for enhancing digital education in tourism and hospitality studies.

By addressing these issues, universities can assist students in acquiring the necessary digital skills to improve their career readiness (Jørgensen, 2019) and contribute effectively to the evolving tourism and hospitality industry. Ultimately, providing graduates with solid digital competencies and knowledge will improve their employability and enable them to adapt to the rapidly changing demands of the industry.

Based on the above-mentioned challenges, two research questions were stated in this paper:

- 1) What is the level of digital skills among students in terms of competence areas: information, communication, security, content sharing, and problem-solving?
- 2) Which factors influence the level of digital skills the most?

Digital skills and industry readiness

As the level of digital technological integration increased, the more did the tourism and hospitality industry transform (Anwar et al., 2024). Ever since the travellers started the migration to the online world, passing from travel agencies and brochures to websites, social media, and mobile phones, digital skills competencies have become a key requirement for employees, i.e., students preparing to enter the workforce in this field (Praničević et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2016). But as the industry tries to stay current with technological changes, businesses constantly push for more skills in the workforce to ensure they are prepared.

However, digital skills in the tourism and hospitality industry extend beyond the basic knowledge of computer literacy and cover a much more complex set of skills (Minor et al., 2024). In today's interconnected work environment, they encompass a broad set of in-demand digital skills, such as digital communication and collaboration, data literacy and analytics, cybersecurity awareness, cloud technology, e-commerce, including AI and machine learning technologies, the Internet of Things (IoT), and blockchain technologies (Ivanov, 2019; Makridakis, 2017). While many students are comfortable using computers or smartphones, possess internet literacy, or are able to communicate with others through applications like email or social media and have the ability to complete tasks like paying the bills, many of these skills are considered entry-level, leading to a gap when that student (later an employee) tries to advance their career (Stylianou & Pericleous, 2025). This gap can affect their employability because they often lack industry-specific digital skills (Ali et al., 2018). Some of the industry-specific digital skills in the tourism and hospitality industries include using data analytics tools to track tourist or guest behaviour and market trends, then using big data analytics for personalized guest experiences, cybersecurity measures to protect guest and business data, and applying AI-driven tools for demand forecasting, among many others.

One of the major barriers to digital skill development is the lack of career-defined digital training in academic curricula (Ali et al., 2018). Furthermore, many educators may be resistant to change, possibly impeding students' success, due to a lack of understanding of the potential benefits or fear of the unknown (Balula et al., 2019; Cheung et al., 2018). Overcoming these barriers is crucial for equipping the next generation of students with

digital skills in the tourism and hospitality industry (Moussa et al., 2024). In the meantime, while there is still demand for traditional roles in hotel food services (such as chefs and waiting staff) (OECD, 2021), it is still evident that digital skills have become a prerequisite for success in the modern workplace. However, many tourism and hospitality study programs continue to focus on traditional management approaches with limited emphasis on technology integration and digital problem-solving (Lugosi & Jameson, 2017). As a result, students may graduate without the digital proficiency in the industry-specific digital skills, making it difficult for them to meet the businesses expectations (Carlisle et al., 2021).

Another obstacle is the lack of a practical approach to these industry-specific digital skills [19]. While having a digital skills theoretical framework is a necessity, on the other hand, providing a practical means of tracking progress in real-world digital systems in the tourism and hospitality industry is crucial for developing digital competency (Boella & Goss-Turner, 2019). To reduce the struggle of students adapting to a digital work environment in a professional setting and to close the gap in digital skills demand and lessen the differences between education and industry demands (Espellita et al., 2019) universities can foster partnerships between them and tourism businesses that can create internship opportunities, allowing students to apply their skills in real-world contexts (Carlisle et al., 2021; OECD, 2021). Universities could also promote lifelong learning initiatives through a form of online courses or professional programs, since lifelong learning has been highlighted as crucial in providing early responses to digitalization and also for keeping skills current (Bughin, 2018; Carretero et al., 2017). Leveraging these approaches enables universities to improve their students' industry readiness by enhancing their curricula (Hossny, 2018) and ensures graduates possess the proficiency and competences in digital skills needed for the workplace, contributing to a more digitally skilled workforce.

Research design and methodology

This research employs a quantitative, experimental approach to examine the level of digital skills areas in the tourism and hospitality industry in North Macedonia. The questionnaire was conducted at the Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics from December 2024 to January 2025. A random sampling method was used to select 100 students from different years of study. Students' participation in the questionnaire was voluntary.

The questionnaire was created according to the research of Helsper et al. (2021) on youth digital skills indicator and International Telecommunication Union's research (2021) on digital skills assessment in the Republic of North Macedonia. It consisted of six parts, including Demographics and Technological factors and the five competence areas

according to the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp), which served as the theoretical basis where students were able to do self-assessment on their digital skills with 6-point Likert scale answers: Information (13 questions), Communication (23 questions), Content sharing (12 questions), Security (9 questions), and Problem solving (8 questions).

The data was analysed using descriptive statistics to summarize the responses, followed by the utilized point assignment from the research by the International Telecommunication Union [32]. Answers on the 6-point Likert scale were put into four groups: advanced user (3 points), often true (2 points), rarely true (1 point), and not true at all (0 points). I don't understand the question (0 points), and I'd rather not answer (0 points) were also included. Moreover, an independent-samples t-test was used to determine if there is a difference between the level of digital skills among genders, then a one-way ANOVA to analyse if the level of digital skills differs between age groups. Linear regression was also used to analyse which out of the two factors most influences the level of digital skills among students. The analysis was conducted using the statistical software SPSS.

Results and discussion

Based on the data collected from the questionnaire, the demographic-technological distribution of the sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample description

	% of Respondents N=100
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	64.0
Male	36.0
<i>Age</i>	
19	14.0
20	20.0
21	22.0
22	21.0
23	9.0
24	4.0
25	2.0
26	7.0
27	/

28	/
29	/
30	1.0
<i>Year of study</i>	
First year	25.0
Second year	15.0
Third year	27.0
Fourth year	17.0
Graduate	16.0
<i>Usage of internet</i>	
Home	38.5
Work/Faculty	26.9
While commuting	26.9
Somewhere else	7.7
<i>Own or use</i>	
Email address	19.8
Social media account	19.8
Blog	2.0
Microblog	2.0
Smartphone	19.8
Tablet, iPad or eReader	4.0
Laptop	16.8
PC	16.0

Source: Author research

The data from Table 1 indicates that the majority of students who participated in the questionnaire were young (20-23 years old) and predominantly female (64.0%). Most students access the internet at home (38.5%) and while at work, faculty, or commuting (26.9%). Smartphone usage is equal to email and social media usage, suggesting familiarity with basic digital communication tools. However, low engagement in blogging and microblogging (2.0%) could be considered as having limited digital content creation skills. To answer the first research question, the scores from the point system used to grade the answers were added up to find out how digitally skilled the students were in the five DigComp competences. The students were then put into four proficiency levels, which are shown in Table 2: “no skills,” “low skills,” “basic skills,” and “above basic skills.” According to the International Telecommunications Union [9], there are four levels of proficiency that show how well a person can use digital technologies, ranging from basic to advanced.

In summary, students lacking digital skills face the risk of digital exclusion, whereas those with low digital skills demonstrate a basic awareness of digital tools but a limited ability to use them effectively. Students with basic (intermediate) skills are those who at this level have functional digital literacy and can use them effectively for work, education, and communication. Students with above-basic (advanced) skills can perform complex digital tasks and use specialized technologies.

Table 2. Level of digital skills across all 5 competences areas

	No. of Respondents N=100
<i>Information</i>	
No skills	0
Low	13
Basic	52
Above basic	35
<i>Communication</i>	
No skills	0
Low	7
Basic	24
Above basic	69
<i>Content sharing</i>	
No skills	0
Low	7
Basic	32
Above basic	61
<i>Security</i>	
No skills	10
Low	1
Basic	12
Above basic	77
<i>Problem solving</i>	
No skills	0
Low	0
Basic	55
Above basic	45

Source: Author research

Most of these students show “basic” or “above basic” skills in all five DigComp competence areas. This means that the students in this group are generally good at digital skills. Many students (77) responded that their security skills were “above basic,” which shows they are aware of the issue and are good at handling it. However, notable “low” skills are present in Information (13), Communication (7), and Content sharing (7) competence areas. Targeted education or training may be necessary for these students to strengthen their digital skills.

Concerns rise in the reporting of 10% of “no skills” in Security, where the majority selected the “I don’t understand the question” answer, which shows that this group of students might be vulnerable and require immediate attention through additional education and training.

Additionally, several factors from the demographic-technological distribution were used to address the second research question. An independent samples t-test in Table 3 was conducted to examine whether there is a significant difference in digital skills levels between women and men.

Table 3. Factor: gender

		<i>Equal variances assumed</i>	<i>Equal variances not assumed</i>	
Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances	F	.488		
	Sig.	.486		
t-test for Equality of Means	t	-1.388	-1.418	
	df	98	77.376	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.168	.160	
	Mean Difference	-.10202	-.10202	
	Std. Error Difference	.07349	.07194	
	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	Lower	-.24786	-.24526
		Upper	.04381	.04122

Source: Author research

Since the p-value is 0.486, it is greater than 0.05, which means we cannot reject the null hypothesis of equal variances. This means that there is no statistically significant difference in digital skills between women and men. The mean difference (-.10202) suggests that on average women and men have very similar digital skills levels.

Next, we examined whether the age factor influences the level of digital skills among students studying tourism and hospitality. A one-way ANOVA test examined in Table 4 whether there are significant differences in digital skills levels across different age groups.

Table 4. Factor: age

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Information	Between Groups	7.040	8	0.880	4.312
	Within Groups	18.572	91	0.04	
	Total	25.612	99		
Communication	Between Groups	7.589	8	0.949	4.375
	Within Groups	19.730	91	0.217	
	Total	27.319	99		
Content sharing	Between Groups	1.778	8	0.222	0.813
	Within Groups	24.881	91	0.273	
	Total	26.660	99		
Security	Between Groups	4.865	8	0.608	7.818
	Within Groups	7.078	91	0.078	
	Total	11.943	99		
Problem solving	Between Groups	3.057	8	0.382	2.132
	Within Groups	16.312	91	0.179	
	Total	19.369	99		

Source: Author research

The most significant difference is seen in the Security competence area ($F=7.818$, $p=.000$), suggesting that different age groups have widely varying levels of knowledge and confidence in online security. Also, there is a significant difference between Information ($F=4.312$, $p=.000$) and Communication ($F=4.375$, $p=.000$) competence areas, showing students that have the ability to find and manage information, as well as that there are different levels of communication-related digital skills. Problem solving ($F=2.132$, $p=.040$) shows significance, but at a weaker level. There are some differences between age groups, but the effect is not as strong as Security, Information and

Communication. As for Content sharing ($F=.0813$, $p=.593$), it does not vary significantly across age groups.

Finally, a linear regression was implemented to identify the factors that influence the five digital competence areas. Factors such as gender and age were chosen as independent variables, while Information, Communication, Content sharing, security, and Problem solving were chosen as dependent variables. Table 5 displays visual summaries of the regression analysis.

Table 5. Summary table of regression analysis

Dependent Variable	Model Significance (ANOVA p-value)	R ²	Significant Predictors	Effect
Information	0.646 (Not significant)	0.009	None	No effect
Communication	0.007 (Significant)	0.089	Age	
Content sharing	(p = 0.007)	Positive		
Security				

Source: Author research

Regression analysis shows that the gender factor ($p=0.022$) only has a significant influence in Problem solving digital skills; men tend to have higher problem-solving skills than women. The age factor significantly impacts Communication (positive - $p=0.007$), which means older students have better digital communication skills, and Security (negative - $p=0.025$), which means older students have lower security skills. Information and Content Sharing as a competence area are not affected by age or gender.

Limitations

Among the limitations of the research is that it can introduce bias, as students could overestimate or underestimate their digital skills. The sample size might also not fully represent the broader student population.

Conclusion

The research provides empirical evidence on digital competency levels, offering valuable insights for educational institutions and policymakers in curriculum design. Results from the research highlight the digital skills gap among tourism and hospitality students in North Macedonia, emphasizing the need for improved digital literacy. There is strong evidence of competencies in communication, problem solving, and security, yet

significant gaps in information processing and content sharing skills, which are crucial for digital engagement in the industry. The findings reinforce the need for higher education institutions to update curricula to include more practical digital training relevant to the industry's evolving needs. The research also suggests that digital skills development should focus on bridging gaps in information management, cybersecurity education, and advanced digital problem-solving techniques.

For future research directions, the research can compare digital skills among students enrolled in tourism and hospitality studies from different countries. It could also investigate the impact of digital upskilling initiatives on employability in the tourism and hospitality industry. Additionally, it could explore businesses expectations regarding digital proficiency and how well academic programs align with industry needs.

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