

From Local to Continental: Sharing Economy Strategies for Sustainable Tourism and European Economic Integration

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Abstract

As Europe continues to strive for deeper economic and social cohesion, the sharing economy emerges as a powerful tool for promoting sustainable development, particularly in the tourism sector. This paper explores how sharing economy models—such as peer-to-peer accommodation, ride-sharing, and collaborative tour services—can facilitate the integration of emerging economies into the broader European economic landscape. By emphasizing access over ownership and encouraging decentralized participation, these models offer inclusive opportunities for local communities, small businesses, and individuals to engage in economic activity, bypassing traditional market entry barriers. Drawing on successful case studies from various EU member states, including Spain and Latvia, the paper examines how sharing economy practices have contributed to regional development, empowered local tourism actors, and addressed sustainability challenges. Particular attention is given to the role of digital platforms, trust-based networks, and consumer behavioural shifts that have accelerated the adoption of sharing models. The analysis further considers how emerging European economies, especially those in the Western Balkans, can adapt and implement these strategies to foster integration and sustainable growth. Barriers such as regulatory uncertainty, tax enforcement, digital infrastructure, and uneven access to education and skills are discussed alongside potential policy solutions. The paper concludes that, when effectively supported by governments and harmonised with European frameworks, the sharing economy can serve not only as an engine of innovation and environmental responsibility, but also as a bridge between local tourism potential and continental economic structures. This approach highlights a path toward more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable tourism aligned with the European Union's strategic vision for cohesion, green transition, and digital transformation.

Keywords: *Sharing economy, sustainable tourism, platform economy, digital visibility, European integration.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the European Union has prioritized policies aimed at achieving greater cohesion, sustainability, and digital transformation across its member states and neighbouring regions. In this context, the sharing economy has emerged as a significant driver of change—offering alternative models of consumption, participation, and economic engagement. Originally rooted in peer-to-peer exchanges and enabled by digital platforms, the sharing economy has extended into various sectors, with tourism being one of the most affected (Gössling & Hall, 2019; Sigala, 2017; Cheng, 2016). By emphasizing access over ownership and decentralized interaction, it offers both economic opportunity and a more efficient approach to resource use. This is particularly relevant for emerging European economies seeking more inclusive and sustainable integration into the broader EU framework (European Commission, 2016).

While the sharing economy has created new pathways for regional development and sustainable tourism, it also poses challenges related to governance, equity, and perception. In countries like Spain and Latvia, sharing economy models have been successfully integrated into the tourism sector. This integration has been facilitated by local infrastructure, evolving digital trust mechanisms, and favourable consumer behaviour. Broader studies confirm that consumers are generally motivated to participate in collaborative platforms due to trust, value, and convenience (Hamari et al., 2015; Ert et al., 2016). For instance, survey data from Spain indicated increasing trust among tourists—especially younger individuals and those with middle-to-high incomes from Spain, France, and the UK—in peer-to-peer rental options (Iljina & Yusupov, 2024). This trend may reflect greater digital literacy, value-oriented consumption habits, and preferences for flexible and localized experiences.

Comparative insights involving Latvia and several Western Balkan countries revealed a more complex picture. Although peer-to-peer rental activity in some Western Balkan states exceeded that of Spain and Latvia in per capita terms, their presence was often underrepresented in digital sources and AI-generated content. These discrepancies pointed to a broader gap between real economic activity and digital visibility. They also raised questions about perceived legitimacy and the role of institutions, platforms, and the media in shaping trust and public image in the sharing economy (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; European Commission, 2021).

The role of public institutions in supporting the development of the sharing economy—particularly in tourism—has proven to be essential. Government involvement through appropriate regulation, infrastructure investment, and public awareness campaigns can create a more reliable and inclusive environment for local actors. Informational support is especially important in emerging economies, where lack of visibility, fragmented communication, or low trust in digital services may hinder participation. Public endorsement and strategic promotion of verified platforms can help counteract misinformation and increase both domestic and international user confidence (OECD, 2021).

This paper explored how sharing economy models—particularly in the tourism sector—can support sustainable regional development and integration within the European context. Using Spain and Latvia as benchmarks of effective implementation, the study compared these with countries in the Western Balkans to examine the role of trust, digital representation, and institutional support. Particular attention was paid to the mismatch between actual activity and online visibility, and to identifying the key actors responsible for building trust.

To address this objective, the study applied a qualitative case study approach, drawing on comparative evaluation of institutional contexts, platform presence, and user trust factors across

Spain, Latvia, and Western Balkan countries. The analysis incorporated survey data from Spain (Iljina & Yusupov, 2024), along with digital representation patterns and publicly available indicators of platform-based activity.

2. Literature Review

The sharing economy has emerged as a significant and rapidly growing area of academic inquiry, attracting the attention of scholars across disciplines such as economics, tourism studies, sociology, digital innovation, and sustainability. Its transformative potential—redefining how people access, distribute, and monetize goods and services—has led researchers to explore both its disruptive effects and its promises for more inclusive and sustainable growth (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Belk, 2014; Sundararajan, 2016; Acquier et al., 2017; Frenken & Schor, 2017; OECD, 2021). As a result, a large and diverse body of literature has developed over the past decade, with increasing attention paid to sector-specific applications, business models, and policy implications (Codagnone et al., 2016; Dillahunt & Malone, 2015; Martin, 2016; Mont et al., 2023). Research on the sharing economy typically follows several major directions. First, a large body of work focuses on the conceptual foundations and definitions of the phenomenon—highlighting differences between sharing, access-based, and platform capitalism models. Seminal contributions by Botsman & Rogers (2010), Belk (2014), and Sundararajan (2016) have laid the groundwork for understanding the logic of collaborative consumption. More recent works such as Acquier et al. (2017) and Eckhardt et al. (2019) critically examine the blurred boundaries between altruistic sharing and commercialized platform operations.

A second prominent strand of research investigates the economic and social impacts of the sharing economy. Scholars analyse both its empowering potential—particularly for micro-entrepreneurs and underutilized assets—and its risks, including precarious labour, inequality, and regulatory avoidance (Martin, 2016; Frenken & Schor, 2017). Recent empirical studies (e.g., Mont et al., 2023; Heo, 2021) assess the actual sustainability outcomes and question whether sharing platforms contribute to or undermine environmental goals.

A third stream focuses on trust mechanisms and user behaviour, especially in the absence of formal institutional oversight. Digital platforms rely heavily on peer ratings, reviews, and algorithmic reputation systems to manage risk and foster engagement. Research by Ert et al. (2016), Zervas et al. (2015), and Hamari et al. (2015) provides insights into what drives participation and how perceptions of trust, fairness, and transparency are formed. Recent work continues to explore how platform design and socio-demographic factors influence user decisions (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2018; Wang et al., 2022).

A growing area of interest is the role of digital infrastructure and policy frameworks in shaping the development of sharing economy ecosystems. Studies here examine how national and regional governments respond to the rise of platforms through taxation, zoning, licensing, and promotion policies (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Codagnone et al., 2016; OECD, 2021). Attention is also paid to uneven digital visibility and access across regions, particularly how countries with limited technological infrastructure or weak representation in global search and AI systems may be disadvantaged (Deepa et al., 2022; Kathan et al., 2016).

Finally, a number of scholars examine the sharing economy in tourism, where temporary access, local interaction, and digital services align closely with traveller behaviour. Tourism-oriented studies (e.g., Guttentag, 2015; Cheng, 2016; Sigala, 2017) investigate how peer-to-peer accommodation, transport, and experiences are reshaping the industry. More recent research

explores implications for destination branding, community impact, and sustainable mobility (Gössling & Hall, 2019; Mody et al., 2021; Lalicic & Weismayer, 2023).

Importantly, the expansion of sharing economy models can serve as a vehicle for regional and cross-border economic integration, especially within multi-state frameworks like the European Union. By lowering entry barriers for individuals and small enterprises, enabling decentralized participation in tourism markets, and encouraging digital connectivity, sharing platforms help to bridge economic gaps between core and peripheral regions. This inclusiveness can foster stronger cohesion, particularly when supported by appropriate regulatory and promotional frameworks that align with regional development goals.

In sum, the sharing economy in tourism is a rapidly evolving field situated at the intersection of technology, consumer behaviour, and governance. Existing research highlights the importance of digital infrastructure, trust mechanisms, and institutional support in shaping both platform effectiveness and user experience. These findings provide a strong theoretical foundation for the present study, which investigates how sharing economy models in tourism contribute to sustainable regional development and integration within the European context. Understanding its dynamics requires a multidimensional approach that incorporates not only user motivation and platform design, but also institutional support and global digital visibility.

3. Trust and User Perception in the Sharing Economy: A Comparative Analysis of Tourist Preferences

To better understand how users engage with peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms in the tourism sector, the present research draws on empirical data collected in Spain during the summer of 2024. The study, conducted by Iljina A., the author of this article, and Yusupov A., a doctoral student at Baltic International Academy, focused on travellers' preferences between traditional hotel accommodations and short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb, Vrbo, and HomeAway. A total of 300 responses were gathered through online and printed surveys in major tourist destinations including Barcelona, Girona, Sitges, and Salou.

A key result revealed that 57% of respondents preferred rental accommodation (e.g., Airbnb, Vrbo, Home Away), while 39.7% opted for hotels, and only 3.3% (6.3% of those with incomes below €20,000) chose hostels. Women demonstrated a slightly stronger preference for rentals (61.1%) compared to men (50%). Income level also proved significant: participants earning €20,000–€80,000 preferred P2P rentals, while those with incomes below €20,000 typically selected hotels. Respondents willing to spend more than €200 per night leaned toward hotels, whereas 70% of those planning to spend less preferred rental options.

Age patterns followed expected trends: individuals aged 18–55 mostly selected rental properties, valuing price, location, and convenience. Conversely, the only age group demonstrating a clear preference for hotels were travellers aged 66 and above. Satisfaction levels with P2P rentals were relatively high—57% reported positive experiences. Importantly, 55.8% of participants aged 18–55 and 60.9% of those aged 56+ expressed a willingness to use rental platforms in the future.

Respondents who preferred hotels (or both types) cited service quality (88.7%), convenience (75.7%), and on-site amenities (57.7%) as the top reasons. Safety (55%) and loyalty programs (22%) were also influential. Conversely, those favouring rentals prioritized location (58%), price (56%), availability of kitchen facilities (53.3%), and a “home-like” atmosphere (50%). Other important factors included space (47.7%) and the opportunity to experience life “like a local” (32.3%). Notably, only 3% of respondents mentioned privacy as a decisive advantage.

When it came to selecting accommodation, digital trust indicators were paramount. The vast majority of respondents (91.3%) said guest reviews were the most important information,

followed by descriptions of amenities (75.7%), accommodation ratings (56.7%), and photos (52%). Price (23.7%) and cancellation policies (0.7%) were less influential.

As for where users searched for rental information, search engines (88.7%) and reviews/recommendation websites (82.3%) led the list, followed by social media (74.3%). Surprisingly, only 41.7% relied directly on booking platforms, while travel blogs and guides were referenced by just 12.7%.

These findings underline that user-generated content, transparency, and reputation mechanisms significantly shape trust and adoption of sharing economy models. Younger and middle-income travellers, in particular, prioritize authentic, flexible, and cost-effective experiences, facilitated by platform functionality and user feedback ecosystems.

In addition to the quantitative survey conducted in Spain, a qualitative study was carried out by the author in Latvia in early 2025. This study employed a focus group method, gathering insights from 11 participants, including both domestic and international tourists who had recently visited Riga and other major destinations. The discussion explored key factors influencing accommodation choices, trust in peer-to-peer platforms, and perceptions of safety, value, and service quality. Although the research methodology differed from the Spanish case—qualitative rather than quantitative—the findings yielded comparable thematic patterns. Participants in Latvia identified similar motivations for choosing rental accommodations, such as price, location, home-like amenities, and the appeal of “local” experiences, while those preferring hotels emphasized predictability, security, and convenience. These results are summarized alongside the Spanish findings in the comparison table above.

Despite methodological differences, comparing these two datasets is both valid and methodologically sound within the framework of mixed methods research. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) argue, combining or juxtaposing qualitative and quantitative insights can strengthen the depth and credibility of findings, especially when they reinforce one another. In this case, the Latvian focus group adds explanatory depth to the Spanish survey, providing context to observed patterns and highlighting the cultural and regional nuances of tourist behaviour in the sharing economy.

The table above presents selected comparative data derived from both the Spanish quantitative survey and the Latvian focus group. While not all variables are directly measurable across both samples, the structure allows for meaningful thematic comparison. It highlights consistencies in user motivations, demographic trends, and digital behaviour patterns despite differences in sample size, methodology, and national context.

For example, both Spanish and Latvian respondents emphasized price, location, and flexibility as primary reasons for choosing peer-to-peer accommodation. Similarly, concerns around service quality, cleanliness, and predictability were common among those who favoured hotels. Furthermore, in both countries, digital trust mechanisms—such as guest reviews, photos, and amenity descriptions—played a central role in shaping consumer decisions. The comparison also reveals how local context influences behaviour: in Latvia, participants often relied on region-specific platforms or community recommendations, whereas in Spain, international platforms like Airbnb were more dominant and widely trusted.

This comparative approach allows for a richer understanding of how the sharing economy is experienced in different European contexts. It helps uncover not only surface-level preferences but also the deeper social, economic, and digital factors that shape tourist decision-making. By presenting data side-by-side, the analysis supports more informed discussions on policy alignment, digital visibility, and sustainable platform development across diverse regional markets.

A side-by-side comparison of thematic patterns and platform-related behaviours is provided in Table 1, highlighting both converging and context-specific trends in tourist preferences.

Table 1. Comparative Summary of Tourist Accommodation Preferences in Spain and Latvia

Dimension	Spain	Latvia
Perception of authenticity	Rentals often chosen for offering local, immersive experiences and contact with hosts	Similar motivation; participants emphasized desire to “live like locals,” especially in Riga
Role of digital familiarity	High digital literacy contributes to confidence in using platforms and evaluating listings	Trust varies; some older or rural users expressed confusion about app usage or online booking
Experience with customer service	Generally positive interaction with hosts and platforms; clear instructions and timely responses were frequently noted	Mixed experiences; some participants praised host attentiveness, while others faced unclear booking terms, delayed replies, and uneven service standards
Top reasons for choosing rentals	Price, location, kitchen availability, space, “local feel”	Price, flexibility, quiet locations, self-catering, rural/eco experiences
Booking decision factors	Guest reviews, amenity descriptions, photos, rating	Similar importance; strong emphasis on reviews, visual confirmation, and platform transparency
Intent to use rentals again	More than half of respondents expressed willingness to use rental accommodations again in the future	Most participants expressed willingness to use again, citing convenience and value
Main information sources	Search engines, review sites, social media	Similar pattern; greater use of local platforms, Facebook groups, and direct host recommendations
Trust level in sharing platforms	Generally high due to widespread use and platform reputation	Moderate; trust depends on guest reviews, host identity, and platform familiarity
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comparative analysis of survey responses from tourists visiting Spain and qualitative insights from a focus group in Latvia reveals notable similarities in motivations and decision-making processes related to peer-to-peer accommodation. In both contexts, participants emphasized the appeal of rental options for reasons such as affordability, location, and the availability of practical amenities. Rentals were often seen as offering a more authentic or “local” experience, especially when compared to standardized hotel stays.

While the Spanish data reflected a strong level of digital confidence among platform users—many of whom relied on guest reviews, images, and detailed descriptions—Latvian participants expressed more mixed feelings. Some reported confusion when navigating platforms or booking procedures, particularly among those less experienced with app-based services. Trust mechanisms, such as peer reviews and platform reputation, were important in both cases, though participants in Latvia more frequently mentioned using region-specific platforms, Facebook

groups, and direct recommendations as sources of information. These findings align with broader literature on trust and perceived value in the sharing economy (Ert et al., 2016; Hamari et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2022), reinforcing the idea that positive digital reputation systems and user-generated content are vital for the continued success of P2P platforms in tourism.

When it came to customer service, experiences varied. Tourists in Spain commonly described interactions with hosts as timely and well-structured, while those in Latvia reported a broader range of experiences, including delays in communication and inconsistencies in service standards. These observations suggest that while peer-to-peer platforms are functioning in both destinations, the consistency and clarity of service delivery may still vary by local context.

Interestingly, although the topic was not directly addressed in the structured table categories, participants in the Latvian focus group also voiced appreciation for accommodation in quieter, rural areas, often with eco-friendly features. This additional insight reflects a growing interest in sustainability and well-being-oriented travel experiences.

Overall, more than half of respondents in both settings expressed willingness to use short-term rentals again in the future, highlighting convenience, price, and past satisfaction. Despite some differences in digital habits and service expectations, the results indicate a shared trend among tourists: a growing openness to peer-to-peer accommodation when key conditions—such as trust, transparency, and usability—are met.

This suggests that sharing economy platforms should adapt not only to technological expectations but also to regional nuances in user experience. Strengthening communication standards, improving onboarding for less digitally fluent users, and building stronger local presence through trusted networks may enhance engagement and long-term satisfaction in diverse markets.

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4. Digital Visibility and Platform Presence in the Sharing Economy

Building on the previous findings, it becomes clear that one of the key strategic dimensions of the sharing economy in tourism is its digital visibility and discoverability. As trust and perceived value are strongly shaped by online presence, searchability, and platform reputation, the degree to which destinations and their offerings are represented on global platforms becomes critical—both for attracting users and for being perceived as developed sharing markets.

Building on the previous findings, it becomes clear that one of the key strategic dimensions of the sharing economy in tourism is its digital visibility and discoverability. Trust and perceived value are strongly shaped by a destination's online presence and its prominence on global platforms. Therefore, the degree to which destinations are represented on services like Airbnb and Booking.com plays a critical role—not only in attracting travellers but also in shaping perceptions of market maturity and competitiveness.

To explore this issue, Table 2 presents approximate figures on the number of listings per country for both Airbnb and Booking.com, along with the density of listings per 100,000 residents (availability as of September 2025).

Five countries were selected to provide a meaningful comparative snapshot. Spain and Latvia represent EU member states with relatively high platform usage and formal integration. In contrast, Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro were chosen as illustrative cases from the Western Balkans—reflecting rising tourism engagement, strong supply-side activity, and increasing

relevance in regional integration discussions. Including all Western Balkan states was beyond the scope of this study; instead, these three were selected to represent varying stages of platform economy evolution within a manageable framework.

Table 2. Platform-Based Short-Term Rental Listings and Density (availability as of September 2025)

Country	Airbnb Listings (k)	Booking.com Listings (k)	Population (millions)	Airbnb Listings per 100k	Booking.com per 100k
Spain	540	41	47.5	1136.8	86.3
Latvia	2.5	1.3	1.9	131.6	68.4
Montenegro	4.2	4.4	0.6	700.0	733.3
Albania	15.5	7.7	2.8	553.6	275.0
Serbia	8.3	10	6.6	125.8	151.5

Sources: *Airbtics, AirDNA, Booking.com search results, national statistical offices.*

Despite Spain having the highest absolute number of Airbnb listings—estimated at over half a million—it also ranks first in per capita density, with approximately 1,137 listings per 100,000 residents. This makes Spain the most saturated market in the sample both in volume and relative terms. Such a result is expected, as Spain has long been considered a leader in digital tourism and platform economy integration, with strong institutional frameworks, infrastructure, and regulatory practices supporting the sharing economy (European Commission, 2021).

By contrast, Montenegro and Albania, despite their smaller populations, exhibit remarkably high Airbnb listing densities—700 and 554 listings per 100,000 residents, respectively. These figures suggest a vibrant supply-side presence on global platforms, even though these countries are often underrepresented in EU and OECD evaluations of sharing economy development. Their platform saturation surpasses that of Latvia and Serbia, reflecting active but perhaps informal or underregulated markets.

A more surprising result emerges in the case of Latvia. Despite being consistently ranked highly in the EU’s Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)—particularly in connectivity and digital public services—its Airbnb listing density is significantly lower than that of the Western Balkan states in the comparison. At only 132 listings per 100,000 residents, Latvia trails not only Spain but also Montenegro, Albania, and Serbia. This raises questions about the conversion of digital capacity into practical engagement with the platform economy.

Adding to this complex picture is the presence of alternative assessments such as the Sharing Economy Index 2024, published by the Consumer Choice Center. This index ranks Belgrade 4th globally among 60 cities, citing low regulatory barriers and high legal openness to various sharing services (Consumer Choice Center, 2024). While useful in capturing the regulatory environment, such indices do not account for actual market engagement, digital readiness, or service quality—highlighting the need for caution in interpreting single-metric rankings.

This contrast underscores a critical issue: high platform activity and regulatory openness do not automatically translate into institutional recognition or perceived digital maturity. Several underlying factors contribute to this disparity:

Insufficient digital infrastructure: Many tourist areas, particularly in the Western Balkans, still lack reliable high-speed internet and widespread access to digital training for hosts.

Poor platform optimization: Listings are often not translated into multiple languages, lack SEO features, or are presented with inconsistent or unprofessional content.

Informality and underreporting: A significant share of active short-term rentals operates outside formal regulation, limiting traceability, tax contribution, and policy integration.

Limited marketing and national branding: Despite strong activity, countries like Albania and Montenegro lack coordinated digital promotion strategies, making them less visible or trustworthy to international users.

Nonetheless, appearing in global rankings, such as the Sharing Economy Index, can serve as a strategic advantage—enhancing external visibility, attracting investor attention, and motivating governments to improve infrastructure, regulation, and international positioning in the digital tourism landscape.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how sharing economy models—particularly in the tourism sector—can promote sustainable regional development and support broader economic integration within the European context. Through comparative analysis of Spain, Latvia, and selected Western Balkan countries, the research demonstrated that while digital infrastructure, consumer trust, and platform design remain crucial factors, visibility and discoverability on global platforms have emerged as strategic assets in shaping perceptions of market maturity and readiness.

Findings from Spain and Latvia illustrate how digital confidence, institutional support, and strong platform engagement foster favourable user experiences and trust. In contrast, countries like Albania and Montenegro—despite high per capita listing densities—struggle with underrepresentation in digital narratives and expert assessments. This visibility-performance gap may result from infrastructural deficits, lack of coordinated national branding, and informality in market participation.

The analysis also confirms that user trust mechanisms, such as reviews, ratings, and peer recommendations, are central to the continued success of peer-to-peer platforms. Cultural context, age, and income level shape accommodation preferences, but convenience, price, and localized experience remain universal motivators.

To ensure that sharing economy strategies contribute meaningfully to sustainable tourism and European cohesion, policy frameworks must address structural imbalances. Public institutions should actively support not only regulation and platform accountability but also digital capacity-building and international promotion. Further research should examine how coordinated platform strategies can amplify the economic voice of peripheral regions and foster inclusive participation in digital tourism markets across the continent.

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