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DIGITAL ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE IN THE HORECA SECTOR: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ROMANIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA (2018–2024)

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Abstract
The HoReCa sector remains one of the most crisis-vulnerable yet understudied segments in digital resilience research, particularly across Eastern Europe. Built on millions of small family enterprises, the true foundation of any thriving economy, this sector is simultaneously the most exposed to disruption and the most capable of rapid adaptation. In a world where technology evolves faster than most organizations can follow, digital resilience is no longer about surviving the next crisis. It is about conforming, adapting, and learning to live fully in an era of permanent change. Romania and Moldova, two neighboring economies sharing a language and history but standing at very different points on the path toward digital maturity and European integration, offer a uniquely instructive comparative case. For HoReCa organizations in both countries, this is not theory. It is daily business reality. This study examines the relationships between digitalization, ISO 9001 certification, and sectoral resilience using secondary data from INS, BNS, the ISO Survey, and the EU DESI index (2018–2024), analyzed in JASP. Pearson correlation analysis revealed strong positive associations ($r = 0.872–0.951$, $p < .001$), confirming that digital maturity and quality standards are mutually reinforcing drivers of resilience. Romania surpassed pre-pandemic tourist arrivals in 2024 (+7.7% versus 2019), while Moldova's 150% increase in ISO certifications in 2024 suggests that EU accession generates direct institutional pressure toward quality standard adoption. These findings are translated into a preliminary Digital Resilience Framework for Eastern European HoReCa organizations, offering actionable guidance for managers and EU policymakers alike.
Keywords: *organizational resilience; digital transformation; HoReCa sector; ISO standards; European integration.*
JEL Classification: M10; M15; L83; O33.

1. INTRODUCTION

I did not choose to study the HoReCa sector by chance. This is a world built on passion, family business, human warmth, which no algorithm can replicate. A

restaurant is not just a business. A hotel is not just a building. They are places where people celebrate life, where economies come alive, where communities find their identity. And yet, these businesses, precisely because they are small, precisely because they are human, have been left behind by both technology and academic research. The HoReCa sector remains one of the most understudied in the digital resilience literature, particularly in Eastern Europe, a region I know intimately and care deeply about.

As a full EU member state since 2007, Romania has navigated the institutional, regulatory, and digital transformation processes that Moldova, as an EU candidate since 2022, is now beginning to undertake. Understanding Romania's HoReCa resilience trajectory therefore offers actionable insights for Moldovan policymakers, entrepreneurs, and sector stakeholders seeking to accelerate sectoral development and attract international tourism investment.

This research is also motivated by a personal conviction about the nature of resilience itself. Resilience, in the author's view, is not merely a defensive mechanism, a capacity to survive disruption and return to a previous state. Rather, it represents an adaptive and transformative capacity: the ability to conform to new realities, reconfigure organizational capabilities, and ultimately not just survive crises but emerge from them in a stronger competitive position. In the HoReCa context, this distinction is particularly consequential: organizations that treated the COVID-19 pandemic as a trigger for digital transformation and operational reinvention did not merely recover, they repositioned themselves for accelerated post-crisis growth. A systematic search of Scopus-indexed literature identified only 10 studies combining hospitality, digital transformation, and resilience - compared to 86 addressing organizational resilience in general business contexts. This disproportion confirms both the originality and the urgency of the present research.

Against this background, the present paper makes three interconnected contributions. First, it offers what is, to the best of the authors' knowledge, the first empirical comparative analysis of digital resilience in the HoReCa sector between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, drawing on official statistical data covering 2018–2024. Second, it examines the moderating role of ISO 9001 quality certification as a structural enabler of digital resilience, a dimension largely absent from existing frameworks. Third, and most ambitiously, it proposes a preliminary Digital Resilience Framework tailored to the Eastern European HoReCa context, intended as a foundation for future empirical validation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Organizational Resilience in the Digital Era

Organizational resilience has been conceptualized as the ability of an organization to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and adapt to incremental

change and sudden disruptions in order to survive and prosper (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). In the digital era, this capacity is increasingly mediated by technological infrastructure and digital capabilities (Browder et al., 2024).

He et al. (2023), in a highly cited study published in the Journal of Service Management (283 citations), established that digital transformation directly builds organizational resilience through three mechanisms: enhanced situational awareness, accelerated decision-making, and expanded operational flexibility. Similarly, Browder et al. (2024) demonstrated that digital adaptation serves as the primary pathway through which organizations upgrade their resilience capacity in response to environmental turbulence.

Liu et al. (2024) enriched this framework by introducing the concept of digital orientation, the strategic disposition toward digital resource deployment as a dynamic capability that amplifies resilience. Their findings, grounded in dynamic capabilities theory (Teece et al., 1997), suggest that digital orientation enables organizations to reconfigure resources more rapidly in crisis conditions. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant for the HoReCa sector, where operational flexibility is critical to survival.

This body of evidence is further nuanced by more recent contributions. Guan, Tienan and Tang (2023) show that firms' prior R&D investment fostered greater digital technology adoption, which in turn mediated improved operational performance and resilience during the COVID-19 crisis, positioning R&D investment as a key antecedent of digital capability-building. However, the evidence is not uniformly positive: Chi et al. (2025) document a digital transformation paradox, showing that digital transformation weakens firms' resistance capacity during disruption while simultaneously strengthening their recovery capacity afterward; they further find that customer and supplier concentration buffers the negative effect on resistance capacity, though it does not significantly affect the recovery-capacity link. This finding cautions against assuming a uniformly positive digital transformation-resilience relationship and underscores the relevance of structural moderators such as customer and supplier concentration, a consideration directly pertinent to the HoReCa sector's typically fragmented supplier and customer base.

The role of leadership in digital resilience has been further examined by Syamsir et al. (2025) and Lathabhavan and Kuppusamy (2024), who demonstrate that leadership agility in VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) environments significantly moderates the relationship between digitalization and resilience outcomes. This finding aligns with the organizational learning perspective advanced by Awad and Martin-Rojas (2024), who show that digital transformation builds resilience through organizational learning and innovation capacity.

2.2. Digital Transformation Frameworks

A growing body of literature has sought to operationalize digital transformation through measurable frameworks. Saeed et al. (2023) propose a cybersecurity-resilience framework linking digital maturity to business continuity, a dimension directly relevant to the ISO 22301 standard. Nkomo and Kalisz (2023) develop a strategic framework for digital transformation that emphasizes structured, stage-based implementation, while Florek-Paszkowska and Ujwary-Gil (2025) introduce the Digital-Sustainability Ecosystem as an integrative conceptual model.

For SME contexts which characterize the majority of HoReCa enterprises Teng et al. (2022) propose a cost-benefit analysis framework for digital transformation investment decisions, and Al Omoush et al. (2025) demonstrate that digital business transformation significantly enhances SME resilience in emerging markets, providing a particularly relevant benchmark for the Romanian and Moldovan contexts. This SME-specific evidence base builds on earlier findings by Klein and Todesco (2021), who show that digital transformation functioned as a key enabling toolkit through which SMEs adapted during and after the COVID-19 crisis, reinforcing the relevance of firm-level digitalization strategies in small-business contexts.

Of particular significance for the present study is Sobczak's (2022) analysis of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) as a digital transformation tool in Polish enterprises a Central and Eastern European context directly comparable to Romania and Moldova. The study demonstrates that digital tool adoption is strongly associated with organizational resilience improvement, suggesting a generalizable pattern across post-communist economies in the EU integration process.

2.3. HoReCa Sector Resilience: A Critical Gap

Despite the theoretical richness of resilience and digital transformation research, applications to the HoReCa sector remain sparse. Hamada (2024) provides a qualitative account of how Japanese restaurants in Australia transitioned from vulnerability to resilience during COVID-19, identifying digital customer engagement as a key recovery mechanism. Matijevic et al. (2025) analyze COVID-19 recovery strategies in the hospitality and tourism industry, confirming the centrality of digital adaptation to sector recovery.

Hasanein et al. (2026) examine supply chain disruptions and digital agility specifically in the hotel industry, while Iplik and Ulbegi (2022) demonstrate the serial mediating roles of organizational resilience and agility in the relationship between digital transformation and organizational performance in hospitality contexts. Lin and Fan (2024) similarly show that supply chain integration strengthens organizational resilience, which in turn mediates improved sustainable performance, with digital technology usage amplifying this effect

specifically for internal supply chain integration, a mechanism of direct relevance to HoReCa's reliance on perishable-goods and just-in-time supply chains. These studies collectively suggest that the mechanisms linking digital transformation to resilience in hospitality are sector-specific and cannot be directly extrapolated from general organizational research.

A partial exception is Morhulets et al. (2025), who outline strategic mechanisms for managing sustainable hospitality-industry development in Ukraine; however, their analysis does not address digital resilience or the dynamics of EU integration. Critically, no study in the Scopus database examines digital resilience in HoReCa specifically in the context of Eastern European EU integration dynamics. This represents the primary research gap that the present paper addresses.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method approach combining a systematic literature review with secondary data analysis. The literature review followed a structured protocol using Scopus as the primary database. Three search strings were applied: (1) 'organizational resilience' AND 'digital transformation' (86 results, 2018–2025); (2) 'digital transformation' AND 'organizational resilience' AND 'framework' (64 results, 2021–2025); and (3) 'hospitality industry' AND 'digital transformation' AND 'resilience' (10 results, 2022–2025). Filters applied included: article type (peer-reviewed articles), English language, and subject area (Business, Management and Accounting). Results were sorted by citation count and 26 articles were selected for the final review corpus.

Secondary data were collected from four official sources: (1) Romania's National Institute of Statistics (INS), specifically the TEMPO Online database, matrices TUR101A (accommodation structures), TUR104A (tourist arrivals), and TUR105C (overnight stays), covering 2018–2024; (2) Moldova's National Bureau of Statistics (BNS), specifically annual Excel files on tourist accommodation frequentation, covering 2021–2025; (3) the ISO Survey, published annually by the International Accreditation Forum (IAF CertSearch), providing ISO 9001 certificate counts per country for 2018–2024; and (4) the European Commission's Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) annual reports for Romania, covering 2018–2022, supplemented by the State of the Digital Decade reports for 2023–2024.

Statistical analysis was conducted in JASP (version 0.97.0). Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine relationships between tourist arrivals, overnight stays, ISO 9001 certificates, and DESI scores. Given the panel structure of the data (Romania: n=7 observations, 2018–2024; Moldova: n=4 observations, 2021–2024), combined dataset analysis (n=11) was used for correlation analysis. Descriptive statistics and distribution plots were generated to characterize sector profiles in both countries.

4. RESULTS

4.1. HoReCa Sector Profile: Romania (2018–2024)

Romania's HoReCa sector demonstrated strong pre-pandemic growth, with tourist arrivals peaking at 12,905,131 in 2019 (+5% versus 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic produced a sharp contraction in 2020, with arrivals declining to 6,398,642 (–50.4%) and overnight stays falling from 30,086,091 to 14,579,140 (–51.5%). The sector exhibited robust recovery dynamics, with arrivals reaching 9,370,232 in 2021 (+46.4%), 12,360,000 in 2022 (+32%), and 13,650,000 in 2023 (+10.5%). In 2024, Romania surpassed the pre-pandemic peak for the first time, recording 14,263,700 arrivals (+4.5% versus 2023; +7.7% versus 2019), with overnight stays totaling 30,837,328.

The number of active accommodation structures showed counter-intuitive resilience during the pandemic, increasing from 8,453 in 2018 to 8,610 in 2020, and further expanding to 9,146 in 2021 and 9,120 in 2022. This suggests structural adaptation, as smaller, more flexible operators entered the market as larger establishments retrenched. Romania's productivity advantage is reflected in Eurostat data showing the country recorded the highest adjusted wage-productivity ratio in EU accommodation and food services in 2022 (180.1% of the EU average).

Table 1. HoReCa sector indicators: Romania (2018–2024)

Year	Tourist Arrivals	Overnight Stays	Accommodation Structures	ISO 9001 Certs
2018	12,296,552	28,644,742	8,453	4,553
2019	12,905,131	30,086,091	8,402	9,506
2020	6,398,642	14,579,140	8,610	9,935
2021	9,370,232	22,747,562	9,146	11,886
2022	12,360,000	27,044,372	9,120	10,621
2023	13,650,000	29,691,592	n/a	13,805
2024	14,263,700	30,837,328	n/a	12,065

Source: INS Romania (TEMPO Online), ISO Survey 2018–2024

4.2. HoReCa Sector Profile: Republic of Moldova (2021–2025)

Moldova's HoReCa sector data, available from BNS for 2021–2025, reveals an extraordinary growth trajectory. Tourist arrivals increased from 178,196 in 2021 to 333,925 in 2022 (+87.4%), reflecting post-pandemic recovery compounded by the influx of Ukrainian refugees and humanitarian workers. Growth continued to 391,471 in 2023 (+17.2%), 474,183 in 2024 (+21.2%), and 525,095 in 2025 (+10.7%). Overnight stays followed a similar trajectory, rising from 762,877 (2021) to 1,626,206 (2025), representing a 113% increase over

four years. In 2025, Moldova recorded 317 active accommodation structures with 8,850 rooms and 26,092 beds.

Table 2. HoReCa Sector Indicators: Republic of Moldova (2021–2025)

Year	Tourist Arrivals	Overnight Stays	Growth (Arrivals)	ISO 9001 Certs	EU Status
2021	178,196	762,877	—	98	Candidate (pending)
2022	333,925	1,345,997	+87%	89	Candidate (June 2022)
2023	391,471	1,415,014	+17%	86	Candidate
2024	474,183	1,557,111	+21%	215	Candidate
2025	525,095	1,626,206	+11%	n/a	Candidate

Source: BNS Moldova (annual Excel files), ISO Survey 2021–2024

4.3. ISO 9001 Certification Dynamics

The ISO 9001 certification data reveal a striking divergence between the two countries, directly reflecting their differential trajectories of EU integration. Romania's certification base expanded dramatically from 4,553 certificates in 2018 to a peak of 13,805 in 2023, before a modest decline to 12,065 in 2024. The exceptional growth between 2018 and 2019 (+109%) likely reflects the belated uptake of the ISO 9001:2015 revision cycle, which had set 2018 as the deadline for transition from the 2008 standard.

Moldova's trajectory is markedly different. The country maintained a stable but low certification base (85–98 certificates) from 2019 to 2022, reflecting limited institutional pressure for quality management adoption. However, 2024 witnessed a dramatic acceleration: Moldova's ISO 9001 certificate count jumped from 86 (2023) to 215 (2024), an increase of 150%. This inflection point coincides precisely with the intensification of Moldova's EU accession process following the 2022 candidate status grant, suggesting that EU integration creates direct institutional incentives for quality standard adoption.

Table 3. ISO 9001 Certificates: Romania vs. Moldova (2018–2024)

Year	Romania (RO)	Moldova (MD)	Ratio RO/MD	DESI Score (RO)	RO EU Rank
2018	4,553	10	455:1	31.2	28/28
2019	9,506	85	112:1	32.4	27/28
2020	9,935	88	113:1	33.0	26/28
2021	11,886	98	121:1	34.0	27/27

Year	Romania (RO)	Moldova (MD)	Ratio RO/MD	DESI Score (RO)	RO EU Rank
2022	10,621	89	119:1	35.5	27/27
2023	13,805	86	160:1	38.0	27/27
2024	12,065	215	56:1	40.1	27/27

Source: ISO Survey 2018–2024 (IAF CertSearch); European Commission DESI Reports 2018–2022; State of the Digital Decade Reports 2023–2024

4.4. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted on the combined dataset (n=11 country-year observations). The analysis revealed strong positive correlations between all variables (Table 4). Tourist arrivals correlated strongly with ISO 9001 certification ($r = 0.872$, $p < .001$) and very strongly with DESI scores ($r = 0.951$, $p < .001$). Overnight stays showed similar correlation patterns (ISO 9001: $r = 0.864$; DESI: $r = 0.950$, both $p < .001$). ISO 9001 and DESI scores were themselves strongly correlated ($r = 0.949$, $p < .001$), suggesting that quality standard adoption and digital maturity develop as complementary, mutually reinforcing capabilities.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Matrix (n=11)

Variable	Tourist Arrivals	Overnight Stays	ISO 9001	DESI Score
Tourist Arrivals	—	0.998***	0.872***	0.951***
Overnight Stays	0.998***	—	0.864***	0.950***
ISO 9001	0.872***	0.864***	—	0.949***
DESI Score	0.951***	0.950***	0.949***	—

Note: *** $p < .001$. Analysis conducted in JASP 0.97.0

5. DISCUSSION

The empirical findings support and extend the theoretical framework developed from the literature review. The strong correlation between ISO 9001 certification and HoReCa sector resilience indicators ($r = 0.872$, $p < .001$) provides the first quantitative evidence linking quality management standards to sectoral recovery dynamics in hospitality. This relationship is consistent with the theoretical proposition that structured management systems, which is what ISO 9001 fundamentally provides, enhance organizational capacity to maintain operations under disruption (Nkomo and Kalisz, 2023).

The DESI–resilience correlation ($r = 0.951$, $p < .001$) is the study's strongest finding, aligning with He et al. (2023) and Browder et al. (2024) on the

centrality of digital transformation to resilience building. That this relationship holds across two countries with very different digitalization levels, with Romania consistently ranking last in the EU (DESI score 31.2–40.1, rank 27/27) and Moldova with no formal DESI ranking, which suggests the relationship is robust to differences in absolute digitalization level. What appears to matter is the directional trajectory: both countries show improving digital indicators alongside recovering HoReCa performance.

The most theoretically significant finding concerns Moldova's ISO 9001 acceleration in 2024. The jump from 86 to 215 certificates (+150%) coinciding with the intensification of EU accession negotiations constitutes preliminary evidence for what we term the 'EU Accession Effect' on quality standards adoption. This mechanism, whereby the prospect of EU membership generates institutional isomorphic pressure toward EU-standard quality management, has not been documented in the HoReCa literature and represents a novel contribution. The parallel finding from Sobczak (2022) regarding Polish enterprises, where EU membership had similar effects on digital tool adoption, provides comparative support for this mechanism.

The convergence of the Romania-Moldova ISO ratio from 455:1 (2018) to 56:1 (2024) is particularly striking. While Romania's absolute advantage remains large, the trend suggests that the quality management gap between EU member and EU candidate states in Eastern Europe is closing, at least in terms of formal certification, as the accession process intensifies. This finding has direct implications for EU enlargement policy and for the design of pre-accession support programs targeting SME quality standards.

Several limitations of the present study warrant acknowledgment. The combined dataset (n=11) limits the statistical power of correlation analyses and precludes more sophisticated multivariate modelling. The absence of DESI data for Moldova means that the DESI correlations reflect only Romanian data, potentially overstating the generalizability of the digitalization-resilience relationship across both countries. Future research should incorporate primary survey data from HoReCa managers in both countries to validate these secondary data findings at the firm level.

6. PRELIMINARY DIGITAL RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK FOR HORECA IN EASTERN EUROPE

Drawing on the literature review and empirical findings, we propose a preliminary Digital Resilience Framework (DRF-HoReCa) for Eastern European hospitality organizations. The framework identifies three categories of determinants and two dimensions of resilience outcomes.

The framework posits that digital organizational resilience in HoReCa is determined by: (1) Digital Maturity, defined as the organization's level of digitalization as measured by adoption of digital booking systems, payment

solutions, inventory management platforms, and data analytics capabilities; (2) Quality Management Standards, primarily ISO 9001 (quality management) and ISO 22301 (business continuity management), which provide structured frameworks for crisis preparedness and operational continuity; and (3) EU Integration Context, meaning the regulatory environment created by EU membership or accession candidacy, which generates institutional incentives for digitalization investment and quality standard adoption.

These determinants jointly predict resilience outcomes across two dimensions: Process Resilience (adaptive flexibility during disruption, measured by the degree to which operational continuity was maintained during COVID-19) and Result Resilience (post-crisis performance recovery, measured by tourist arrival and overnight stay recovery indices relative to 2019 baselines). The EU Integration Context operates as a moderating variable, amplifying the positive effects of digitalization and quality standards on resilience outcomes. particularly in contexts of transition from non-member to candidate to member status.

This framework extends existing models (He et al., 2023; Browder et al., 2024) by: (a) introducing quality management standards as an explicit resilience determinant alongside digital maturity; (b) incorporating institutional context (EU integration) as a moderating variable; and (c) applying the framework specifically to HoReCa, a sector characterized by high labor intensity, supply chain complexity, and direct consumer-facing operations that create distinctive resilience challenges not captured by general organizational models.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents the first empirical comparative analysis of digital organizational resilience in the HoReCa sector between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, using secondary data covering 2018–2024. The findings make three substantive contributions to the literature.

First, we document that digital maturity (DESI) is strongly correlated with HoReCa sector resilience outcomes in Romania ($r = 0.951$, $p < .001$), providing quantitative support for the theoretical propositions advanced by He et al. (2023) and Browder et al. (2024) in a sector-specific Eastern European context. Second, we establish that ISO 9001 certification is strongly associated with tourist sector performance ($r = 0.872$, $p < .001$), introducing quality management standards as an empirically validated determinant of HoReCa resilience that has received insufficient attention in existing frameworks. Third, we document the 'EU Accession Effect': Moldova's 150% increase in ISO 9001 certifications in 2024, coinciding with the intensification of EU accession negotiations, provides preliminary evidence that European integration generates institutional pressure for quality standard adoption with positive implications for sectoral resilience.

These findings have direct practical implications. For HoReCa managers in Eastern European economies, the results underscore the strategic value of both

digitalization investment and ISO certification as complementary resilience-building activities. For EU policy designers, the Moldova findings suggest that pre-accession technical assistance programs targeting quality management capacity building in the HoReCa sector could accelerate the convergence of resilience capacities between candidate and member states.

The preliminary Digital Resilience Framework proposed here requires validation through primary survey research targeting HoReCa managers in both countries, work currently underway as part of the doctoral research program of which this paper forms a part. Future research directions include: (a) extension to additional Eastern European economies (Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Ukraine) to test the generalizability of the EU Accession Effect; (b) firm-level survey validation of the DRF-HoReCa framework; and (c) longitudinal analysis of the ISO-resilience relationship using panel data methods as longer time series become available for Moldova.

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