

Smart tourist destinations are a tool for achieving success in the tourism sector "Sultanate of Oman as a model "

الوجهات السياحية الذكية أداة لتحقيق النجاح في القطاع السياحي "سلطنة عمان نموذجاً"

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Abstract:

Smart tourism is a modern approach that utilizes advanced digital technologies and information and communication technology to enhance the quality of tourism services and improve the efficiency of destination management. The goal is to boost the competitiveness and sustainability of tourist destinations by utilizing resources efficiently and enhancing the visitor experience. A noteworthy example of this approach is seen in the Oman Governorate, where integrated digital platforms have been created to monitor tourist flows and manage services effectively. These initiatives have resulted in improved tourism performance indicators and an increased capacity to accommodate a growing number of tourists while upholding environmental and economic sustainability. This model underscores the significance and impact of employing smart technologies in promoting sustainable development within the tourism sector.

Keywords: Smart tourism, Smart destinations, Information and communication technology, Tourism industry.

Jel Classification Codes :L83 ; O33

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I- Introduction:

Smart tourist destinations play a crucial role in the success of tourism by facilitating better management of tourist flows and enhancing services. They incorporate various management approaches, methods, and tools, including the utilization of tourist data. The concept of smart tourism also involves the sharing of social data by tourists, which allows for improved offerings and experiences. This results in the emergence of a "smart" tourist profile, contributing to the overall development of the destination.

Some believe that smart tourism has emerged in recent years due to the rise of smart cities, while others see it as an evolution of traditional and electronic tourism. It can be argued that incorporating intelligence into tourism has facilitated the emergence of smart tourism, which heavily depends on collecting and integrating data about tourist destinations. This data is accessible to tourists through smart device applications that serve visitors anytime and anywhere using intelligent technologies. The tourism industry is considered one of the leading sectors moving into the smart digital world. Tourists no longer rely on tedious traditional methods or travel agencies for trip planning. Whether it involves bookings, tickets, or other travel arrangements, the global shift of travel companies is steadily moving toward smart tourism, competing with other economic sectors.

A smart city provides numerous services and a wide range of advantages, including advanced infrastructure, smart applications, and organized management across various sectors such as healthcare, banking, education, and industry. Residents of a smart city benefit from enhanced security and safety, as well as continuous internet access. As populations continue to double both in the Arab world and globally, governments are striving to enhance their innovations and boost financial capacities to develop electronic programs on a larger scale in response to the population's needs.

Despite the growing global attention toward digital transformation in the tourism industry, the practical translation of smart tourism concepts into effective destination management strategies remains limited in many developing and emerging economies. The shift from traditional tourism models to smart, technology-driven systems requires not only digital infrastructure but also institutional readiness, policy coherence, and stakeholder collaboration. In the Arab context, few studies have empirically analyzed how these elements converge to create genuinely smart tourist destinations that enhance competitiveness, sustainability, and visitor experience.

Within this framework, the Sultanate of Oman provides a particularly relevant model, as it has embarked on an ambitious digital transformation process under Oman Vision 2040, seeking to modernize its tourism sector and integrate smart technologies into destination management. However, the extent to which Oman's initiatives reflect the essential dimensions of smart destinations—as conceptualized in the literature and operationalized through models such as the Six-As Model (Attractions, Accessibility, Amenities, Available packages, Activities, and Ancillary services)—remains insufficiently examined.

Therefore, the central problem addressed by this study can be formulated as follows:

To what extent has the Sultanate of Oman succeeded in integrating the components of smart tourist destinations within its tourism development strategy, and how does this integration contribute to enhancing the overall performance, competitiveness, and sustainability of the tourism sector?

II- Theoretical and Conceptual Framework:

II -1- Tourism Industry:

It consists of public and private organizations that collaborate to develop the production and marketing of goods to meet the needs and well-being of tourists. The term tourism is generally used to describe travel and, in some cases, the increasing amount of travel undertaken by tourists. The main product of the tourism industry is not something produced by the industry itself; rather, it is often the heritage, wealth, and social legacy that constitute a tourist destination. This is complemented by the promotion and facilitation of hospitality management, which directs the activities of visitors and provides them with goods and services during their stay (Asma Sahli, 2022)

The primary function of the tourism industry is to serve travelers. The success of this industry depends on positive relationships among all sectors. Therefore, this synergy among tourism service providers is expected to result in a positive experience for each tourist. Essentially, tourism encompasses four main sectors (Camilleri, 2017)

- **Transportation:** Smart technologies facilitate improved transportation options, including real-time updates on public transport, smart taxis, and ride-sharing services, making travel more efficient and user-friendly;
- **Accommodation:** Hotels and other lodging facilities utilize smart technologies for enhanced guest experiences, such as automated check-ins, room controls via mobile apps, and personalized services based on guest preferences;
- **Ancillary Services:** Various additional services, like guided tours, dining options, and local attractions, benefit from smart tourism through the use of apps and platforms that help travelers make informed decisions and optimize their itineraries;
- **Sales and Distribution:** The distribution of travel products has been transformed by smart technologies, allowing online booking systems, dynamic pricing, and direct marketing strategies that improve how services are offered and purchased by tourists.

II -2- Smart Tourism:

According to Gretzel and others, smart tourism is defined as "tourism supported by integrated efforts at a destination to collect and aggregate data derived from physical infrastructure, social connections, governmental/regulatory sources, and human entities/minds, alongside the use of advanced technologies to transform that data into valuable experiences and commercial offerings at sites, focusing on efficiency, sustainability, and enrichment of the experience (Gretzel, 2018)

The word "smart" has become somewhat of a buzzword in recent years. For something to be truly smart, it must possess complex technological capabilities to develop and operate the product. While the concept of intelligence is not directly linked to tourism, the two are inevitably intertwined in today's world. For tourism to be considered smart, destinations and tourist attractions, along with stakeholders in the tourism industry, will utilize a variety of innovations and technological practices. As such, the use of technology is at the core of the smart tourism concept (salah mehrez et al., 2023)

It is evident from the various definitions of smart tourism that there is no single, precise interpretation. Recently, experts and specialized tourism organizations have proposed several definitions. One such definition describes it as a "platform that integrates tourism resources and information and communication technology across all stages of the tourist journey." The primary goal of smart tourism is to leverage digital communication through mobile devices to foster smarter,

more meaningful, and sustainable connections between tourists and their destinations (Moataz Hameed Rahim Al-Khazaali, 2024)

II -2- 1-Smart Tourism Tools:

- **Cloud Computing:** NIST defines cloud computing as a model that provides on-demand network access to a shared pool of configurable computing resources (like networks, servers, storage, applications, and services) that can be rapidly provisioned and released with minimal management effort or service provider interaction. The cloud model includes five essential characteristics, three service models, and four deployment models (salah mehrez et al., 2023)
- **Software as a Service (SaaS):** This model offers software via the cloud, allowing users to access applications over the internet without needing to own the software. Customers pay for their usage rather than a full purchase;
- **Platform as a Service (PaaS):** In this model, users do not have control over the underlying cloud infrastructure. Instead, they have control over the applications they deploy on the platform;
- **Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS):** This provides virtualized computing resources over the internet. Users access these resources through a communication service provider, which maintains control over the underlying physical infrastructure .

Open data refers to data that anyone can access, use, or share. In 2010, Tim Berners-Lee introduced the 5-star open data deployment program to measure the quality of open data from 0 to 5 stars: (Neuhofer, 2015)

- Unfiltered data available online in any format with an open license;
- Data is organized in structured formats like PDF, Excel, XML, or CSV;
- Data that can be legally reused based on licensing;
- Data available in non-proprietary formats;
- Data is identified by URLs with update dates, allowing for easy reference.

II -2- 2-Requirements for Smart Tourism

The implementation of smart tourism necessitates several conditions, including: (Dhahabiya Belaid, 2021)

- **Digitization of Infrastructure:** Comprehensive tourism databases must be established to digitize the tourism sector's infrastructure;
- **Government Role:** The government plays a crucial role in guiding and regulating the performance and quality of the digital services provided;
- **Urban Planning Strategies:** Availability of digital urban planning strategies for infrastructure, such as road networks, communication systems, and general service frameworks;
- **Supportive Legislation and Funding:** There should be legislation and funding that promote smart policies and programs to facilitate the transition to smart cities, thereby achieving sustainable development;
- **Technical Personnel:** Skilled technical personnel must be present to manage and monitor the digital systems effectively;
- **Community Awareness:** It is essential to raise community awareness about the importance of smart tourism in supporting economic growth.

II -3-Smart Tourist Destinations

Smart tourist destinations are defined as "innovative tourist destinations built upon infrastructure utilizing the latest technologies to ensure the sustainable development of tourist areas. These destinations are accessible to all, facilitating visitors' interaction with or integration into their surroundings, which enhances the quality of the visitor experience and improves the quality of life for residents" (Samir Jbeil, 2023.)

II -3-1-Dimensions of a Smart Tourist Destination

A new analytical framework for smart tourist destinations incorporates six groups of indicators derived from integrating a "smart" component into each of the six dimensions identified by Spada and Buhalis for a successful destination. This foundational model was first introduced in 2000 in the book *Destination Management Systems: Criteria for Success - An Exploratory Study*. These six dimensions have been widely recognized by numerous tourism researchers.

The six dimensions (6As) essential for successful tourist destinations are: (Mouhamed amine boudkhil et al, 2020)

- **Attractions:** This includes natural features such as mountains, artistic amenities like amusement parks, and cultural events such as music festivals;
- **Accessibility:** The complete transportation network within the destination, including available routes, entry points, and suitable public transportation options;
- **Amenities:** All services that facilitate a comfortable stay, including accommodation, dining, and recreational activities;
- **Available Packages:** Service bundles offered by intermediaries designed to highlight unique and responsive aspects of the destination to tourists;
- **Activities:** All activities accessible at the tourist destination that primarily drive tourists to visit;
- **Ancillary Services:** Everyday services not primarily targeting tourists, such as banks, postal offices, and healthcare facilities.

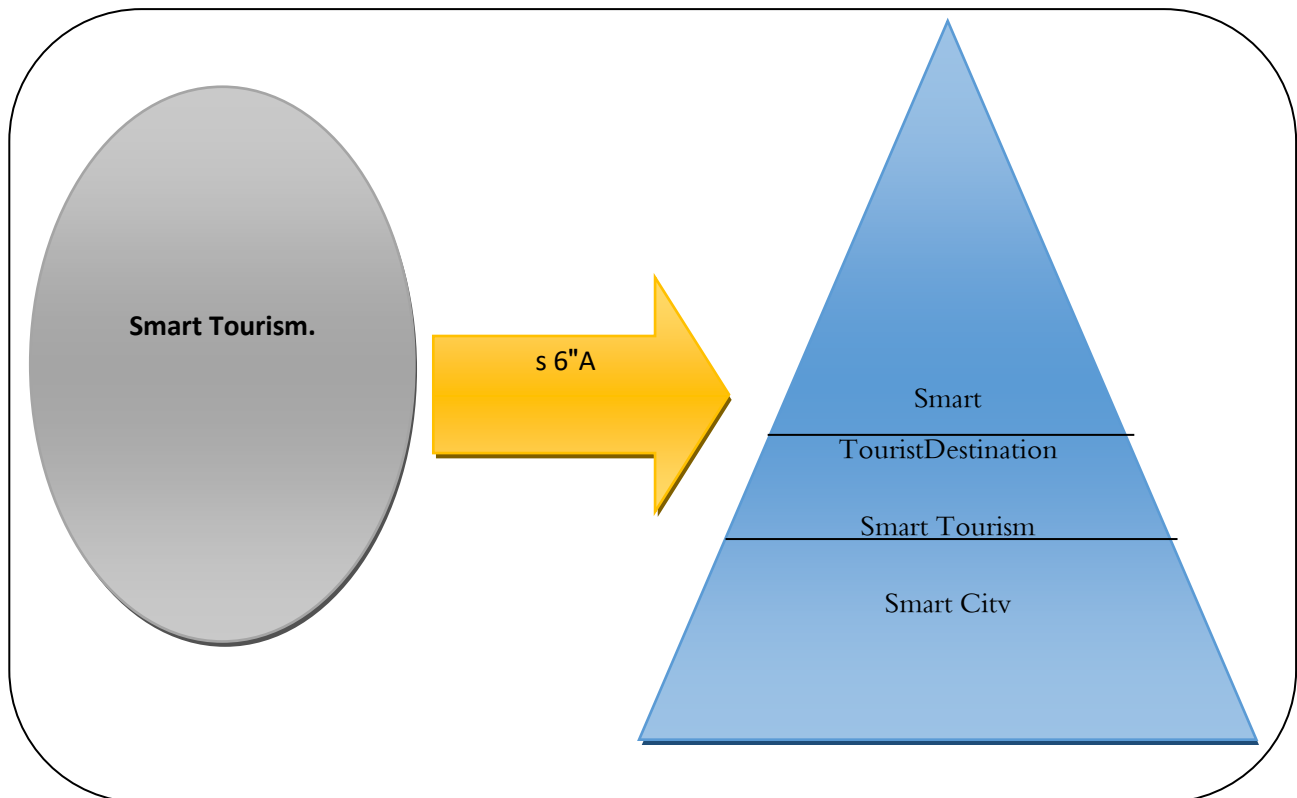
Maintaining these six dimensions effectively is critical for destinations to remain competitive in the tourism industry. However, as consumers increasingly participate in co-creation, developing countries must recognize that traditional approaches are increasingly obsolete. It is vital to engage all stakeholders to facilitate a dynamic co-creation process that enhances destination competitiveness.

II-3-2-Difference Between Smart City, Smart Tourism, and Smart Tourism Destination :

Smart tourism is based on the smart city concept, expanding its functions to include tourism-related activities. It utilizes the existing city infrastructure designed for residents. The modern definition of a smart tourism destination incorporates the smart city paradigm, information and communication technology, the Internet of Things, and various aspects of tourism (Gretzel U. S., 2015)

While smart cities primarily focus on residents, smart tourism destinations prioritize the tourist experience. The literature on distinguishing smart tourism from smart tourism destinations remains scarce.

The interdependencies and linkages among these concepts underscore the necessity for comprehensive infrastructure, extending beyond traditional tourism destination infrastructure, to realize the benefits of smart tourism.

Figure (1): Relationships Between Different Concepts of Intelligence

Source: Eberhardt, C. (2019, March). Capabilities needed to become a Smart Tourism Destination Use Case: Helsinki and Berne. Bachelor's thesis Degree programme in Business Information Technology. Berne, Switzerland: Hämeenlinna University Center.

II -4-Smart Destinations: The Future of the Tourism Industry :

II -4-1-Information Technology and Tourism Competitiveness :

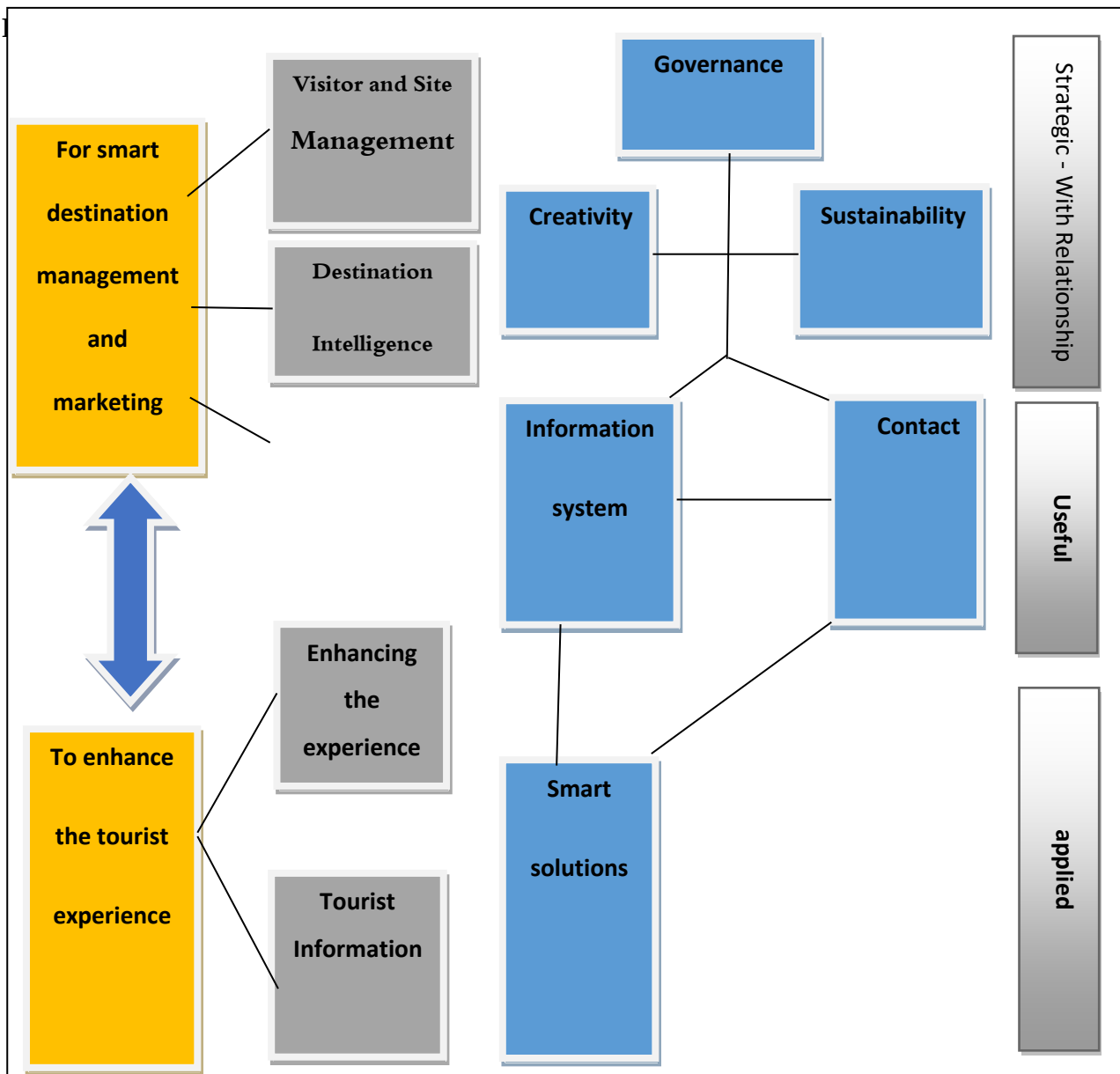
Information technology (IT) encompasses the latest advancements in the electronic domain, including tools such as computers and communication technologies used to acquire, process, analyze, store, retrieve, disseminate, and apply information. IT profoundly influences tourism industry management by enabling effective collaboration within the sector and providing essential tools that support globalization.

As a vital business tool, IT enhances competitiveness through several key aspects: (PETRINIC, 2013)

- Creating new job opportunities and fostering innovative management practices;
- Strategically utilized to gain a competitive advantage;
- Increasing productivity and overall performance;
- Introducing novel methods of management and organization;
- Encouraging the development of new business ventures.

II -4- 2-Smart Solutions Offered by Smart Tourist Destinations :

According to Ivars Vidal et al., smart solutions comprise technology-based applications and tools employed by smart destination management organizations to fulfill their objectives, which include enriching visitor experiences and optimizing management processes. As a result, a smart destination integrates cutting-edge technologies with established information and communication technologies (ICT) to deliver a broad spectrum of smart solutions.



The Source: Femenia-Serra & Ivars-Baidal, Do Smart Tourism Destinations Really Work? The Case of Benidorm, 2018, p. 05

III- Case Study: The Sultanate of Oman and Its Experience in Adopting Smart Tourism :

Oman boasts one of the most diverse environments in the Middle East, featuring various tourist attractions that have established Oman as a significant global tourist destination. To market these landmarks, virtual reality projects have been implemented, and several mobile applications have been developed to help tourists easily explore Oman, such as the Muscat Geotourism Guide. The Omani government has considered smart initiatives to be a primary focus area in the coming years. To enable a more integrated and responsive government toward citizens and the business sector, Oman has adopted smart initiatives and launched various smart projects intersecting diverse strategic fields.

In July 2018, Omantel and the Ministry of Tourism signed a strategic partnership to enable tourists to enjoy a big data-based application providing a comprehensive travel experience, including Wi-Fi service at several famous forts in the Sultanate. The overall goal of Oman's tourism strategy is to become, by 2040, the premier destination for holidays, discoveries, and meetings, contributing to economic diversification (Mouhamed amine boudkhil et al, 2020)

Muscat Governorate in Oman is home to the country's first smart city, covering a total area of 14 million square meters. It consists of 20,000 housing units and 2.9 million square meters of green spaces, in addition to various integrated. The project, recently inaugurated by Sultan Haitham bin Tariq of Oman, serves as a model for future cities in the Sultanate. The city also represents an attractive investment destination and a qualitative leap in urban design and planning, aligning with the vision of "Oman 2040". (project., 2023)

Named Sultan Haitham City, the project aims to "meet the requirements for economic and social growth while preserving the cultural heritage for future generations," according to architect Hamad bin Nasser Al-Hinai. He views this smart city, designed to accommodate 100,000 residents, as "a unique model for the future of Omani cities," containing attractive elements for living, residency, and use". which is an important step in realizing the country's urban strategy ."

Key features of the city include a road network that offers multiple access options, allowing for various routes for both vehicles and pedestrians. Additionally, the diversity in land use and building configurations is a core aspect that makes cities enjoyable for their inhabitants .

These statistics are taken from the National Center for Statistics and Information: (Information, 2024)

Regarding the tourism sector's contribution to GDP, it is expected to rise to 2.7 billion Omani Riyals in 2024, reflecting growth in the sector.

The total number of visitors to Oman is anticipated to be approximately 3.8 million in 2024, showcasing a growing reliance on digital promotion and electronic facilitation.

Furthermore, total tourism expenditure in Oman increased to 1.02 billion Omani Riyals in 2024, indicating that the rise in spending is linked to the quality of services enhanced by smart technologies.

By July 2024, the number of hotel guests (3-5 stars) is estimated to have exceeded 1.25 million, demonstrating a trend towards smart booking and accommodation management .

Oman ranks 41st worldwide in the E-Government Index (2024), highlighting the development of digital infrastructure that supports smart tourism.

Similarly, Oman holds the 45th position globally in the Government Readiness for Artificial Intelligence Index (2024), as reported by the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology (MTCIT), which reflects the focus on advanced technologies in service management, including tourism.

III-1-Methods and Materials:

The study adopts a descriptive–analytical methodology that combines theoretical description, comparative analysis, and applied investigation. It explores the concept of smart tourism and smart tourist destinations as key outcomes of the digital transformation within the tourism sector. The research relies primarily on secondary sources, including academic studies, scientific articles, and specialized books in both Arabic and English, while drawing on foundational works by scholars such as Gretzel (2018), Eberhardt (2019), and Femenia-Serra (2018). An applied case study of the Sultanate of Oman was conducted as an Arab model for the adoption of smart tourism within the framework of Oman Vision 2040. The study employed qualitative analytical tools, including the Six-As Model (6As) to assess the components of a smart tourist destination, along with a comparative analysis highlighting the relationship between traditional tourism, smart tourism, and the smart city.

III-2-Results and discussion:

The empirical data and recent initiatives highlighted in Oman’s tourism and urban development landscape provide compelling evidence of a growing alignment between national policies and the global paradigm of smart destinations. The integration of digital infrastructure, technological innovation, and sustainable urban planning indicates that Oman is consciously embedding the principles of smart tourism within its broader socioeconomic transformation strategy.

III-2-1- Smart Tourism as a Pillar of Economic Diversification :

The projected increase in tourism’s contribution to GDP—rising to 2.7 billion Omani Riyals by 2024—reflects not merely sectoral growth, but the tangible impact of digitalization and smart governance. This trend supports the findings of Buhalis and Amaranggana (2014), who emphasize that smart tourism functions as a catalyst for economic diversification and value co-creation. The positive trajectory in visitor numbers (approximately 3.8 million tourists) and tourism expenditure (exceeding 1 billion OMR) underscores the correlation between digital facilitation (e.g., e-booking, virtual experiences) and enhanced tourist engagement.

However, this growth also requires adaptive capacity in human capital, cybersecurity, and data management to ensure long-term competitiveness and resilience.

III-2-2- Integration of Smart Infrastructure and Urban Design :

The inauguration of Sultan Haitham City, Oman’s first smart city, constitutes a landmark in the national effort to merge tourism, sustainability, and technology within a unified spatial strategy. Covering 14 million m² and hosting 100,000 residents, the city represents a model of smart urbanism—combining connectivity, mixed land use, and environmental balance. This initiative is consistent with Gretzel et al. (2015), who argue that the success of smart destinations depends on an integrated urban–tourism ecosystem that facilitates mobility, digital access, and cultural interaction.

Nevertheless, the challenge lies in ensuring that such projects extend beyond technological showpieces to generate inclusive benefits for local communities and SMEs operating within the tourism sector.

III-2-3- Digital Maturity and Institutional Readiness :

Oman's ranking—41st globally in the E-Government Index and 45th in the AI Readiness Index (2024)—demonstrates substantial progress in digital governance and infrastructural preparedness. These indicators confirm Hypothesis 3 (H3) from the earlier framework, which posits that institutional coordination and infrastructure readiness are decisive factors in successful smart tourism implementation. The partnership between Omantel and the Ministry of Tourism (2018) to deploy big data-based applications exemplifies the strategic integration of public and private efforts in data-driven tourism management.

Yet, a critical observation emerges: while digital readiness is evident, data interoperability and strategic analytics remain underexploited. To move from digital availability to digital intelligence, Oman must institutionalize mechanisms for data sharing across ministries, tourism operators, and local communities.

III-2-5- Smart Experiences and Visitor Engagement :

The development of applications such as the Muscat Geotourism Guide and virtual reality tools demonstrates Oman's intent to enrich visitor experiences through immersive technologies. This aligns with the experience co-creation paradigm described by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), where tourists are not passive consumers but active participants in shaping their experiences. Such tools enhance destination image and perceived value, strengthening Oman's position as a "premier destination for holidays, discoveries, and meetings".

However, these digital innovations are still concentrated in specific areas (notably Muscat), revealing a spatial imbalance between the capital region and peripheral governorates. Expanding smart tourism initiatives to rural and heritage-rich areas would contribute to spatial equity and sustainable regional development.

III-2-6- Policy Alignment and Strategic Vision

The results also reaffirm that Oman's tourism strategy is fully aligned with Oman Vision 2040, which frames smart initiatives as both an economic necessity and a governance imperative. The integration of tourism, urban planning, and ICT policy under a unified vision reflects a coherent top-down approach. Nonetheless, the bottom-up dimension—citizen participation, community-based innovation, and SME inclusion—requires further institutionalization to ensure that smart tourism evolves as a participatory ecosystem rather than a state-driven agenda.

Overall, these findings reveal that Oman has achieved substantial progress in establishing the foundational layers of a smart tourism ecosystem—technological infrastructure, institutional coordination, and strategic vision. The empirical indicators point to measurable improvements in tourism performance, urban design, and digital capacity. However, for Oman to transition from "digital readiness" to "smart maturity," it must deepen integration across tourism sub-sectors, enhance data-driven governance, and cultivate a culture of continuous innovation.

IV-Conclusion and Recommendations:

The analysis of Oman's experience demonstrates that the Sultanate has entered an advanced phase in its transition toward smart tourism, guided by a clear strategic vision articulated in Oman Vision 2040. The integration of smart technologies, urban innovation, and sustainable development principles has contributed to shaping a more dynamic and competitive tourism ecosystem. Quantitative indicators—such as the growth in visitor numbers, tourism revenues, and international digital readiness rankings—affirm that the country's efforts are yielding tangible results in strengthening both the sector's performance and its global image.

From a conceptual standpoint, the Omani model exemplifies the transformation of tourism from a resource-based economy to a knowledge- and innovation-driven system, where data, connectivity, and experience design become central to value creation. The establishment of Sultan Haitham City as a smart urban model, and the adoption of digital applications such as the Muscat Geotourism Guide, reflect the growing convergence between urban policy and tourism management. This approach enhances accessibility, promotes cultural sustainability, and facilitates a more interactive relationship between visitors and destinations.

However, despite these achievements, several structural and operational challenges persist. The research highlights three critical gaps:

- Limited data integration across institutions and tourism operators, which constrains evidence-based decision-making;
- Uneven spatial diffusion of smart tourism initiatives, largely concentrated in the capital region;
- Insufficient digital competencies among tourism professionals and local stakeholders, impeding the adoption of advanced analytical and management tools.

To address these challenges and consolidate Oman's progress toward a fully smart destination, the following recommendations are proposed:

IV-1-Develop a National Smart Tourism Framework :

A unified framework should be established to coordinate policies, standards, and digital interoperability across ministries, municipalities, and private tourism enterprises. This would enable data exchange, promote service integration, and enhance the efficiency of tourism management systems.

IV-2-Strengthen Data-Driven Governance :

Implementing advanced analytics and big data systems can support real-time monitoring of tourist flows, preferences, and satisfaction levels. This would allow the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism to design adaptive strategies aligned with demand fluctuations and sustainability targets.

IV-3-Expand Smart Tourism Beyond Muscat :

Smart initiatives should be extended to secondary and rural destinations to ensure balanced regional development and social inclusion. Smart mobility, digital heritage mapping, and community-based platforms could help connect remote areas with the national tourism network.

IV-4-Enhance Digital Skills and Innovation Capacity :

Targeted training programs in collaboration with universities and technology firms should be launched to build competencies in AI applications, digital marketing, and smart service

management. Encouraging startups in tourism technology (TourTech) would further stimulate innovation.

IV-5-Foster Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs)

Sustaining smart tourism development requires long-term partnerships between public authorities, telecom companies, and private operators. The 2018 collaboration between Omantel and the Ministry of Tourism represents a successful model that can be expanded to other sectors.

In conclusion, Oman’s strategic orientation toward smart destinations has positioned it as a leading example in the Arab region for integrating digital transformation, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism development. The coming decade will determine whether this transformation evolves into a fully mature smart tourism ecosystem—one that not only enhances economic performance but also ensures inclusivity, environmental balance, and cultural continuity.

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