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Prioritizing Optimal Strategies for Smart Tourism with the Agency of Social Media and Explaining the Model

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: In today's world, the tourism industry has extensive impacts on economic, social, and cultural fields, and the development of this industry can serve as a driving force for other industries. The vast country of Iran, with its climatic, cultural, and historical conditions, is one of the best countries in the world for implementing the smart tourism industry. Therefore, it is necessary to continuously identify the changing needs of customers (tourists) and pay attention to the essential aspects, namely satisfaction, security, and the pleasure of travel. However, in our country, not only has useful research on optimal smart tourism strategies not been conducted, but the agency of social media has also not been considered. The primary aim of the present research is to explain and prioritize optimal smart tourism strategies with the agency of social media, presenting a practical model.

Methodology: For this purpose, questionnaires were distributed among individuals working and active in governmental and non-governmental organizations in Hamedan, and were analyzed and prioritized using the "Hierarchical Analysis" technique.

Findings: The results of this research have identified three categories of strategies for optimal smart tourism with the agency of social media, including strategies based on social media, strategies based on revenue generation, and strategies based on responding to tourist needs, each category comprising several components.

Conclusions: It is recommended that tourism packages be dynamic with the ability to change packages instantly. Offering such services is only feasible through software or tourism apps. This factor significantly impacts increasing tourism.

Keywords: *Smart tourism, Social media, Optimal tourism strategies.*

1 Introduction

Tourism is an interdisciplinary phenomenon that has close connections with many industries and market areas, and the development of this phenomenon can play an important role in sustainable development. Currently, despite Iran being among the top 10 countries in the world in terms of having various tourist attractions, it does not hold a worthy position in the world in terms of tourist attraction, tourism management, tourism prosperity, and consequently, the increase in foreign currency income (Haghighat Ghahfarokhi et al., 2023). Indeed, traveling and acquainting oneself with new lands have been of interest to humans since ancient times and have been considered important and sometimes sacred in various cultures around the world. Today, the tourism industry is one of the important sources of income and an effective factor in cultural exchanges between countries, holding a special place as the world's largest service industry. As such, many countries are in a close and intense competition to increasingly enhance their benefits and revenues from this international activity. In today's competitive world, the first trip to a tourist destination does not mean success for that tourist destination; rather, it is the repetition of trips to tourist destinations and their introduction and promotion among potential tourists that can secure long-term success for that tourist destination (Ghaffari, 2019).

Management in tourism in today's advanced world has moved towards dynamic tourism management, and some theorists of the postmodern tourism school have challenged the notion of travel as merely physical displacement, stating that with the use of modern technology and the changes it brings to tourism and the expansion of virtual reality, travel can also occur non-physically (Ghorbani et al., 2021). Smart tourism is a new practical term that describes the increasing dependency of tourist destinations, industries, and various forms of tourists on new forms of information and communication technology that turn a vast amount of data into valuable propositions. All efforts towards smartification are significant and coordinated efforts and strategic investments to enhance innovation, quality of life, and sustainability through enriching physical infrastructures with data for specific destinations. On one hand, smart tourism refers to "smart destinations" that are specific instances of smart cities. They implement smart city principles for cities and rural areas, not only considering residents but also "tourists" in their efforts to support dynamism, innovation, access, collection, maintenance, and quality of life for visits. Smart tourism is defined from the perspective of smart destinations as an innovative tourist destination built on modern technology infrastructure, ensuring the sustainable development of tourist areas and providing accessibility for all, facilitating visitor interactions, the integration of their surrounding environment, enhancing the quality of experience at the destination, and improving the quality of life for residents (Kontogianni & Alepis, 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Shafiee et al., 2018).

Considering that supporting sustainable tourism development with innovative and creative solutions is possible in all fields, this has provided an opportunity for researchers to explore concepts related to the smartification of tourist destinations. In such circumstances, smart tourism is gradually emerging as a growing trend. Smart tourism plays a significant role in activating cultural tourism, economy, and social and sustainable development. Although it is clear that developments are still in their early stages for many reasons, smart tourism is expected to grow significantly among cities worldwide and tourist destinations. Despite the high potential of smart tourism destinations in providing better services to tourists, the use of this technology has not yet been adequately considered by researchers. In Iran, the implementation of smart tourism destinations is at the beginning of its development path, and despite the necessity of tourism development in Iran, less attention has been paid to this technology (Shafiee et al., 2018), which requires urban infrastructures. Therefore, the first step towards creating a smart city is understanding the concept. In fact, one of the major challenges for destination managers is the reduction in demand and consequently, the non-use of tourism facilities and amenities during certain seasons of the year, referred to as seasonality (Seddighi et al., 2001; Sharif et al., 2020; Soltani et al., 2018).

In the contemporary era, known as the age of information and the information and communication society, a significant portion of society's socialization occurs through media. The influence and impact of media are such that some communication theorists believe that media determine our mental and even behavioral priorities. If they do not teach us how to think, they teach us what to think about. Media, through the correct or incorrect presentation of content, cause individuals to be oriented and are capable of creating a public mindset in society (Kontogianni & Alepis, 2020; Taghavi & Sadeghi, 2017). Despite the extensive research in the field of tourism focusing on tourists, recreational places, transportation, tourist guides, etc., these studies have not yet

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examined the content and prioritized strategies for optimal smart tourism with the agency of social media. Furthermore, considering that significant studies regarding the prioritization of optimal smart tourism strategies with the agency of social media have not been conducted in both domestic and international resources, there is considerable potential for theoretical development in this area. Operationally, the problem of this research has been considered at two levels: "case" and "country." Currently, at the country level, we are witnessing a decline in all areas of tourism (Haghighat Ghahfarokhi et al., 2023). A problem that nearly all actors in the field of tourism, including the tourism sector of Hamedan province, face is that conventional methods cannot increase tourism demand, and they are looking for innovative methods to improve the productivity of tourism institutions. Therefore, considering that the concept of smart tourism is a new concept in tourism literature and few researchers have addressed the prioritization of optimal smart tourism strategies with the agency of social media, the goal of this research is the prioritization of optimal smart tourism strategies with the agency of social media (Case study: Hamedan).

2 Methods and Materials

Given that the aim of the research is to prioritize optimal strategies for smart tourism with the agency of social media, to develop knowledge about it, and to present a model in this field, the paradigm used in this research is interpretivism. This research is of an applied nature because it is conducted with the intention of applying knowledge practically and using the findings to answer the questions raised in the research samples (Hamedan Municipality, Hamedan Islamic Council, organizations and institutions under the Hamedan Municipality, Hamedan Cultural Heritage, Hamedan Management and Planning Organization, General Directorate of Economic Affairs and Finance of Hamedan Province, Bu-Ali University, Islamic Azad University of Hamedan, Hamedan University of Technology, Payame Noor University of Hamedan, General Directorate of Education of Hamedan Province, Governorate of Hamedan, Hamedan Governorate, Hamedan Science and Technology Park, Hamedan Peyam Newspaper, General Directorate of Culture and Islamic Guidance of Hamedan Province). In this study, general judgments are deduced by using detailed information and establishing connections between them. Observations are made on specific events in the mentioned samples, and then, based on the observation of incidents or events, general inferences are made. The research approach is inductive, meaning moving from specific to general. The strategy of this research is quantitative. Since this research is conducted in the mentioned samples, it examines phenomena in their real-life context without manipulation, studying things that have occurred naturally and realistically, making this research field-based. As this research seeks to create a new theory and expand knowledge regarding smart tourism with the agency of social media, the research aim is exploratory, and quantitative data collection was conducted through a questionnaire. Additionally, data analysis in this research was carried out using the Hierarchical Analysis method. Based on previous information from the mentioned organizations in Hamedan (as the population) and their subsets, and considering the research objectives, simple random sampling was used to select statistical samples. Finally, through "generalization," this information was attributed to the main population. The sample size in this research was calculated using the formula for sampling from a finite population, resulting in a minimum sample size of 292 respondents, with questionnaires distributed among 300 individuals.

Four primary tests for examining the quality of the research design included verifiability, believability, transferability, and reliability were evaluated. In the end, to examine and evaluate the model, two experts in smart tourism and social media and two academic experts were asked to assess the existing model, all of whom confirmed the model.

3 Findings and Results

Considering the decision tree construction and identifying the criteria and competing options using the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP), the options were evaluated. Competing options at level three were compared pairwise against each criterion at level two. The pairwise comparisons were made using a scale designed from equal preference to extremely preferred, with selections ranging from one-ninth to nine. Initially, in the pairwise comparisons, the equivalent importance was specified priority-wise, and then the corresponding numerical value was included in the comparison table. Pairwise comparisons were conducted based on expert opinions, and the geometric mean was used to examine the combination of comparison tables completed by experts. This method has helped the researcher to consider not only each member's judgment but also reach the group's collective judgment on each pairwise

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comparison. For example, concerning strategies based on social media, Table 1 shows the normalized matrix of pairwise data for these strategies, calculated by dividing each of the pairwise comparison column data by the sum of each column and then determining the priorities related to social media-based strategies by calculating the average of the rows as described in the following table.

Table 1

Normalized Matrix and Priority Values Regarding Strategies Based on Social Media

Priorities	Sum	Conversion of Cryptocurrency to Common Currency	Electronic Payments and Digital Wallet	Use of Artificial Intelligence	Creation of International Credit Card	Connection to Various Automations such as Hotel, Flight, and Survey Services	Creation of a Native Smart Tourism Platform	Strategies Based on Social Media
Conversion of Cryptocurrency to Common Currency	0.28	1.71	0.13	0.15	0.26	0.49	0.42	0.26
Creation of a Native Smart Tourism Platform	0.10	0.61	0.08	0.12	0.10	0.16	0.10	0.06
Connection to Various Automations such as Hotel, Flight, and Survey Services	0.24	1.44	0.36	0.40	0.29	0.18	0.11	0.09
Creation of International Credit Card	0.09	0.55	0.11	0.09	0.09	0.06	0.09	0.10
Use of Artificial Intelligence	0.16	0.94	0.20	0.15	0.15	0.06	0.12	0.26
Electronic Payments and Digital Wallet	0.13	0.75	0.12	0.09	0.10	0.06	0.16	0.23
Conversion of Cryptocurrency to Common Currency (Sum)	1.00	6.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

Then, to prioritize and determine the impact of each criterion, these factors were compared pairwise, as detailed in the Table 2.

Table 2

Comparison Matrix of Evaluation Criteria Relative to Each Other

Optimal Smart Tourism Strategies with the Agency of Social Media	Strategies Based on Responding to Tourist Needs	Strategies Based on Creating Income	Strategies Based on Social Media
Strategies Based on Social Media	0.49	1.12	1
Strategies Based on Creating Income	0.49	1	0.22
Strategies Based on Responding to Tourist Needs	1	0.51	0.51
Sum	3.23	4.64	3.01

The consistency ratio is a mechanism that shows the consistency of comparisons and indicates to what extent the priorities derived from group members or the combined tables can be trusted. If the consistency ratio is less than 0.10, the comparisons' consistency is acceptable. Therefore, to calculate the consistency ratio in this research, the following steps were performed:

- Determining the priority of each option relative to the criteria using normalization logic and weighted average
- Calculating the weighted sum vector
- Calculating the consistency vector
- Calculating the eigenvalue
- Calculating the consistency index

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- Calculating the consistency ratio

The consistency index (CI) is calculated using the following formula:

$$CI = \frac{\lambda \max - n}{n-1}$$

$$CI = \frac{\lambda_{\max} - n}{n-1} = \frac{6.08-6}{2} = 0.04$$

Here, n represents the number of competing options, which is n=6.

$$CR = \frac{CI}{RI} = \frac{0.04}{0.58} = 0.0689$$

Therefore, the group's pairwise comparisons are consistent as the consistency ratio is less than 10%.

The priorities for strategies based on social media include creating a native platform for smart tourism (Windows, Linux, Android, iOS), establishing an international credit card for tourists, creating an electronic payment infrastructure and digital wallet, converting cryptocurrency to common currency for domestic and international tourists, connecting to various automations such as hotel, flight, and survey (location-based services) within smart tourism, and using artificial intelligence to access tourists' interests and preferences. The prioritization of these strategies for research samples is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Priorities of Strategies Based on Social Media

Rank	Social Media-Based Strategies
1	Creation of a Native Smart Tourism Platform (Windows, Linux, Android, iOS)
2	Creation of International Credit Card for Tourists
3	Establishment of Electronic Payment Infrastructure and Digital Wallet
4	Conversion of Cryptocurrency to Common Currency for Domestic and International Tourists
5	Connection to Various Automations such as Hotel, Flight, and Survey (Location-Based Services) within Smart Tourism
6	Use of Artificial Intelligence to Access Tourists' Preferences and Interests

The priorities for revenue-based strategies include allocating smart SIM cards to tourists (including packages, data, voice, calls), organizing seasonal and event festivals for tourists to use smart tourism services, offering currency exchange services and OTT multimedia services to tourists, providing NTT (National Travel and Tourism) related to contractual occasions, marketing and monitoring tourism services, co-creation between supply and demand for tourism (blogs and microblogs), and offering subsidies for smart tourism to tourism institutions. The prioritization of these strategies for research samples is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Priorities of Strategies Based on Creating Income

Rank	Income-Creating Strategies
1	Allocation of Smart SIM Cards to Tourists (Including Package, Data, Voice, Calls)
2	Organization of Seasonal and Event Festivals for Tourists to Utilize Smart Tourism Services
3	Offering Currency Exchange Services and OTT Multimedia Services to Tourists
4	Providing NTT (National Travel and Tourism) Related to Contractual Occasions, Marketing, and Monitoring of Tourism Services
5	Co-creation between Supply and Demand in Tourism (Blogs and Microblogs)
6	Offering Subsidies for Smart Tourism to Tourism Institutions

The priorities for strategies based on responding to tourist needs include offering specialized tourism services (health, religious, adventure, art, nature tourism, etc.), examining tourists' satisfaction with smart tourism performance, tourist information architecture (attractive places for tourists, favorite recreational activities, etc.), the dynamism of tourism packages and the ability to change packages instantly, continuous updating of tools and infrastructures for smart tourism, and the development of smart tourism services (quality and quantity). The prioritization of these strategies for research samples is presented in Table 5.

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Table 5

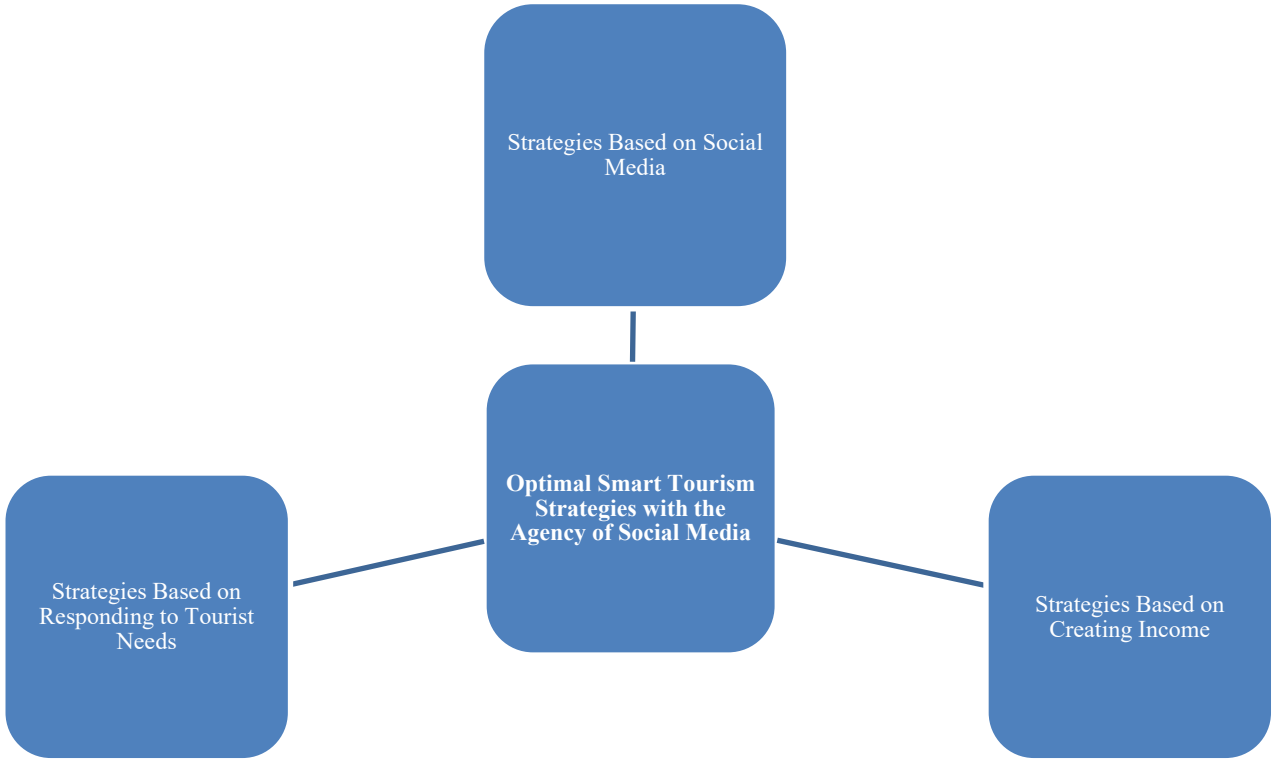
Priorities of Strategies Based on Responding to Tourist Needs

Rank	Strategies Based on Responding to Tourist Needs
1	Offering Specialized Tourism Services (Health, Religious, Adventure, Art, Nature Tourism, etc.)
2	Reviewing Tourists' Satisfaction with Smart Tourism Performance
3	Tourist Information Architecture (Attractive Places for Tourists, Favorite Recreations, etc.)
4	Dynamism of Tourism Packages and the Ability to Change Packages Instantly
5	Continuous Updating of Tools and Infrastructures for Smart Tourism
6	Development of Smart Tourism Services (Quality and Quantity)

Based on this, the model of priorities for optimal strategies for smart tourism with the agency of social media is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Simple Model of Study



4 Discussion and Conclusion

Given that the primary objective of this research is to explain and prioritize optimal strategies for smart tourism with the agency of social media, the question arises: What are the optimal strategies for smart tourism, and what impact will social media have on them? The results of the conducted research indicated that the dimensions of the smart tourism model with the agency of social media could be categorized into forty main issues including the lack of a comprehensive information database on buildings and tourist spots, the absence of a strong reference social media (website, blog, social network, etc.) in the field of tourism, the lack of strong content production in tourism, the existence of cost, process, and inter-unit problems related to smart tourism, the growth of awareness and changes in tourists' desires, the need to reduce tourism costs and innovative methods in tourism, the development and exploitation of innovations in the tourism sector, the emergence of protests, complaints, and high

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expectations of tourists from smart tourism, the need to utilize the potential of new methods in tourism, problems related to macro tourism policies, the staff's ignorance of the sector's laws, the excessive standardization of tourism, tourists' reluctance towards smart processes, creating a native platform for smart tourism, allocating smart SIM cards to tourists, offering currency exchange services and OTT multimedia services to tourists, generating new revenues for tourism institutions through social media, providing NTT, co-creation between supply and demand in tourism, offering specialized tourism services, using artificial intelligence to access tourists' preferences, creating an integrated ecosystem in tourism, establishing an electronic payment infrastructure and digital wallet, offering subsidies for smart tourism to institutions, monitoring specific tourist spots, focusing on the tourism value chain, developing smart tourism in mobile operators, developing ICT activities, collecting and maintaining standard big data related to tourism, the opportunities and threats of smart tourism, the strengths and weaknesses of smart tourism, enhancing the status and credibility of tourism institutions, creating differentiation in service quality and fame of tourism institutions, creating employment, national development through the start-up of the development engine (tourism), the prosperity of small and local businesses, high commissions of hotels and travel agencies, operational, software, and e-service issues, inadequate budget and financial resources of institutions, and the existence of extensive and permanent changes in smart tourism.

Several studies have offered strategies for tourism development (Buhalis, 2020; Destek & Aydın, 2022; Hall et al., 2020; Jia & Zhao, 2022), but very few have discussed concepts related to smart tourism such as tourist information architecture, creating native tourism platforms, and the dynamism of tourism packages and the ability to change packages instantly. However, the present study, while implicitly covering these concepts, has introduced a novel and more comprehensive set of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of smart tourism with the agency of social media in the form of a model. In the previous research (Dadazade- Silabi & Ahmadifard, 2019; Ghaffari, 2019; Khajehnabei et al., 2020), dimensions affecting tourism's impact on economic development, tourism development strategies, the impact of tourism on the economy and society, and key drivers affecting tourism development were mentioned, indicating the presence of existing opportunities and threats in tourism. This research, while encompassing these concepts, also covers categories related to offering currency exchange services and OTT multimedia services to tourists, providing NTT (National Travel and Tourism) related to contractual occasions, marketing and monitoring tourism services, and creating native platforms for smart tourism associated with the agency of social media. Additionally, in this study, threats of smart tourism with the agency of social media, including the decline in tourism quality due to the lack of face-to-face communication with audiences, software problems, the potential for increased rumor-spreading and false news, the formation of harmful subcultures among tourists, the possibility of social isolation for tourists and staff in the tourism sector due to smart tourism, the risk of misuse of personal data, and the focus on only abstract concepts in tourism have been examined, which have not been mentioned in any smart tourism models so far.

In conclusion, among the limitations of this research, it can be mentioned that accessing some scientific resources and articles was challenging because studies related to the topic of smart tourism with the agency of social media were very scarce. Also, accessing experts and scheduling interviews with them was quite difficult due to their busy schedules and daily activities within their respective organizations. Based on the discussions and the results of this research, suggestions and strategies based on patterns of smart tourism with the agency of social media are offered to practitioners of smart tourism in the research samples:

1. It is recommended that currency exchange services and OTT multimedia services be provided to tourists through tourism apps. With these services, tourists would be able to easily perform any banking services, currency exchanges, or payments using their mobile phones.
2. It is suggested that a native electronic payment infrastructure and digital wallet specifically for tourists be established so that they can easily make and receive payments for tourism services.
3. It is recommended that tourism packages be dynamic with the ability to change packages instantly. Offering such services is only feasible through software or tourism apps. This factor significantly impacts increasing tourism.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Authors Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Ethics principles

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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