UNLOCKING UZBEKISTAN'S TOURISM POTENTIAL: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SMART TOURISM FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

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Abstract. The paper explores the potential impact of smart tourism on unlocking sustainable growth opportunities in Uzbekistan's tourism sector. By analyzing Uzbekistan's current state of tourism, the paper highlights the significance of adopting smart tourism practices to enhance visitor experiences, improve destination management, and foster long-term sustainability. The research delves into the concept of smart tourism and its relevance to Uzbekistan's unique cultural and historical offerings. It investigates how leveraging technology, data analytics, and innovation can attract more tourists and ensure responsible tourism development. The study underscores the importance of strategic planning, infrastructure development, and stakeholder collaboration in harnessing Uzbekistan's tourism potential through smart tourism initiatives. Ultimately, the paper advocates for the integration of smart tourism strategies as a key driver for achieving sustainable growth, preserving cultural heritage, and maximizing economic benefits in Uzbekistan's dynamic tourism landscape.

Keywords: Tourism, smart tourism, destination management, sustainability.

In recent years, countries worldwide have highlighted tourism as a vital industry that promotes their overall economic development. One of the first industries to digitally transform corporate operations worldwide was tourism, which led to the introduction of online travel and hotel booking. When information and communications technology (ICT) spread over the world, the tourist industry consistently embraced new platforms and technologies first (Digital Transformation | UNWTO, 2020). The tourism industry has been impacted by the smart phenomenon due to its high reliance on information technologies which have become increasingly integrated into travel experiences and product management in recent years (Gretzel et al., 2015). The European Union specifies "smart tourism" as a destination that uses ICT-based (information and communications technology) solutions to make it easier for visitors to access tourism and hospitality products, services, venues, and experiences. A city's intelligence is enhanced, and tourist engagement is increased via the investment and development of these resources. This affects both individuals and companies who gain from more effective infrastructure and service delivery (Mines Tiernan, 2023).

There is abundant potential for growth in the Uzbek tourist sector with its rich historical, archaeological, architectural, and ecological resources. The country's tourist industry has grown substantially over the several years as one of the areas targeted for reform and economic growth.

On January 28, 2020, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan convened a special meeting to discuss future tourist initiatives, pointing out the issues of promoting physical culture, and tourism development. This is clearly demonstrated by the efforts being made to attract visitors and improve the construction of tourism infrastructure in various areas, particularly the approval of the "Tourism Development Concept in Uzbekistan for 2019- 2025" (Presidential Decree..., 2019). The primary

objective of the state's tourism policy in Uzbekistan is to guide the industry in the future to ensure the rapid, all-encompassing development of regions and their infrastructure, the resolution of current socioeconomic issues, the growth of jobs, diversification, and development (Tadjieva, 2022). The rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has altered the conventional framework for the growth of the tourist industry and added intelligence to destinations. It is important to combine technology and tourism in ways that go beyond the typical visitor experience or development cycle, which will structurally change the tourist industry as a whole. The tourist sector is still undergoing a significant transformation since more advanced technical solutions are emerging (Buhalis, 2022).

Smart tourism

Smart tourism refers to the use of technology, data analytics, and digital platforms to enhance visitor experiences, improve destination management, and optimize tourism operations (Wang et al., 2020). Numerous academics have paid a lot of attention to the emerging smart tourism industry by examining the topics of technology implementation, the impact of technologies on visitors and suppliers, and smart destinations, and as a result, there are several different definitions of Smart tourism have been defined. The Organisation for Smart Tourism in the U.K. introduced different definitions of smart tourism in 2011, referring to digital or "smart" tourism as using technology in the tourist industry. According to Jennie Germann Molz (2012), "smart tourism" is an emerging philosophy that uses mobile digital connectivity to forge links between travellers and the destination that are more intelligent, meaningful, and sustainable as a way to engage deeply in civic life rather than merely as a means of simple consumption (Li et al., 2017). Gretzel Sigala et al. (2015) defined smart tourism as the collection and exchange of data via hardware and software to improve visitor experiences, encourage value co-creation, and ultimately boost the development of a tourist destination. According to the UNWTO (2015), tourism is a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon that involves people travelling to other nations or locations for personal, business, or professional reasons (Gretzel et al., 2015).

The Importance of Smart Tourism in Uzbekistan

In the context of Uzbekistan, smart tourism initiatives can play a crucial role in attracting a diverse range of travellers, from adventure seekers to cultural enthusiasts. For example, the development of mobile apps, virtual reality tours, and interactive maps can provide visitors with valuable information about historical sites, cultural events, and local attractions, enhancing their overall experience in the country. The growth of digital technology has had an impact on the tourist business in Uzbekistan in recent years. Some gradual improvements have been observed even in developing country Uzbekistan in terms of digitalisation, though modern Uzbekistan still needs to adapt to the Smart City's standards. Management, taxes, infrastructure, marketing, education, medical, and other fields have all created eastern "smart" systems throughout history, particularly in Uzbekistan's cities. On the state policy level, the development of smart cities in Uzbekistan is now attracting the most attention, and the government has established a strategy for implementing smart city technology (Shohistahon et al., 2020). Furthermore, data analytics can help tourism stakeholders better understand visitor preferences and behaviour, enabling them to tailor their offerings to meet the needs of different market segments. By leveraging technology in this way, Uzbekistan can position itself as a cutting-edge destination that caters to the evolving demands of modern travellers. In addition to enhancing visitor experiences, smart tourism can also play a critical role in promoting sustainable practices and responsible tourism principles in Uzbekistan. As the country seeks to attract

a growing number of visitors, it is essential to ensure that tourism development is carried out in a way that preserves the country's cultural and environmental heritage for future generations (Mukhtorova, Kiran and Ekiz, 2023).

By adopting sustainable practices such as waste management, energy efficiency, and community engagement, Uzbekistan can minimize the negative impacts of tourism on its natural resources and local communities. Moreover, responsible tourism initiatives that promote cultural exchange, support local livelihoods, and respect traditional customs can ensure that the benefits of tourism are shared equitably among all stakeholders. Uzbekistan is consistently progressing in this direction in an effort to improve its tourism sector and attract more foreign tourists. The State Committee on Tourism of Uzbekistan is developing a proposal for smart technology for state museums and cultural heritage sites. In 2018, 50 historical sites in Bukhara received QR codes, which enable visitors to the historical site to quickly and easily access all information on their smartphones about the location's hotels, restaurants, and other attractions as part of the country's Verum QR smart tourist development initiative (Aliyeva, 2018). With the development of the tourism business in Uzbekistan, mainly in historical and ancient cities like Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva and Tashkent, new historically valuable areas and new cultural sites are emerging. Each cultural, historical, archaeological, and tourist centre and object must correspond to its national identity and historical appearance, which increases the interest of tourists. Historically significant locations and new cultural sites are emerging as a result of the expansion of the tourist industry in Uzbekistan, particularly in historic and ancient towns like Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva, and Tashkent. The national identity and historical appearance of each cultural, historical, archaeological, tourist attraction, and artefact must match in order to pique visitors' attention. In 2019, The Uzbekistan Pass initiative, which offers a variety of travel services, was one of the most significant advancements for travellers. The first and only national product that has been launched that offers a wide variety of travel services in Uzbekistan is the Uzbekistan Pass. This project may serve as a foundation for the growth of smart tourism in the country. Pass is connected with existing services and applications, making the service quick and easy for visitors from all across the country. The Play Market and Appstore both provide downloads for mobile applications. Additionally, the organization has created multilingual pocket instructions which allow users of the Uzbekistan Pass to get these for free (Abdurakhmat, 2019). Smart tourism has the potential to unlock Uzbekistan's vast tourism potential and drive sustainable growth in the industry. By leveraging technology, data analytics, and digital platforms, Uzbekistan can enhance visitor experiences, improve destination management and attract a diverse range of travellers. Furthermore, by adopting sustainable practices and responsible tourism principles, the country can ensure that the benefits of tourism are shared equitably among local communities and contribute to preserving its cultural and environmental heritage. Through a strategic focus on smart tourism, Uzbekistan has the opportunity to position itself as a leading destination in the region and drive long-term economic development while safeguarding its unique identity for future generations. By embracing innovation and sustainability in its tourism development efforts, Uzbekistan can create a vibrant and resilient tourism industry that benefits both visitors and local communities alike.

Strategies towards smart tourism

• Policy Recommendations: Provide recommendations for the Uzbek government on implementing policies that support the development of smart tourism initiatives, such as investing in digital infrastructure, promoting innovation in the tourism sector, and incentivizing sustainable practices.

• Capacity Building: Propose strategies for building the capacity of local stakeholders, including tour operators, guides, and small businesses, to leverage technology effectively in enhancing visitor experiences and managing tourism destinations.

• Public-Private Partnerships: Highlight the importance of fostering partnerships between the public and private sectors to drive smart tourism initiatives, such as developing digital marketing campaigns, creating interactive visitor experiences, and implementing sustainable tourism practices.

• Community Engagement: Emphasize the need for engaging local communities in the tourism development process, including consultation, education, and empowerment, to ensure that they benefit from tourism activities and are actively involved in preserving their cultural and environmental heritage.

• Monitoring and Evaluation: Recommend establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the impact of smart tourism initiatives on visitor satisfaction, destination management, environmental conservation, and economic development, allowing for continuous improvement and accountability.

• International Collaboration: Advocate for collaboration with international organizations, tourism associations, and academic institutions to exchange best practices, access funding opportunities, and promote Uzbekistan as a leading smart tourism destination on a global scale.

By incorporating these strategies as implications, actionable insights for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and researchers may leverage smart tourism for sustainable growth in Uzbekistan's tourism industry.

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