

**SECTION MANAGEMENT, MARKETING, ECONOMIC,
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**STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF SMART TOURISM
DESTINATIONS: A CROSS-GENERATIONAL STUDY**

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Abstract: Transforming tourism destinations using technology that makes the travel process efficient and pleasant for different generational groups is crucial. Any attempt to achieve this goal should start with an analysis of the feedback tourists provide about their digital experience at a destination. This study was carried out to gain an understanding of the perceptions of Romanian tourists of the strengths and weaknesses of smart tourism destinations as the first part of any SWOT analysis designed to collect critical factors about the current situation aiming to improve it to remain on a highly competitive market. The empirical data was obtained from 628 tourists belonging to Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z. The results showed, after a MAXQDA Analytics Pro analysis, that for all four generations considered, the number of respondents who identified strengths is higher than those who mentioned weaknesses. The study also found more similarities than differences across generations in tourists' perceptions of smart technology. Beyond Wi-Fi, destination marketers should focus on internet signal quality and mobile apps for improved travel experiences. However, generational gaps emerged: older generations valued ease of use, while younger ones prioritized access to information apps. Gen Y identified virtual experiences as a weakness, while Gen Z highlighted problematic applications. By leveraging these tourism destination strengths, marketers can optimize their digital strategies, ensuring relevance and resonance across diverse demographic segments. Moreover, such insights empower tourism destinations to innovate more effectively, meeting the evolving needs and expectations of each generation in an increasingly digital landscape.

Keywords: smart tourism destinations; Baby Boomers; Generation X, Y, Z; strengths; weaknesses.

JEL Classification: M15; M21; Z32.

1. Introduction

Tourism, the industry that before the Covid-19 crisis outpaced the growth of the worldwide economy for nine consecutive years, was one of the first sectors deeply impacted by the pandemic (Huang and Wang, 2023). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization barometer, the 1.3 million international arrivals show that the tourism industry has recovered 88% of its pre-pandemic level (UNWTO, 2024). The 2024 expected recovery is closely related to digitization, which has not only made the process of planning and carrying out the trip much more straightforward but also allowed the managers of the tourist destination to offer visitors personalized experiences based on the preferences expressed through their digital behaviors (Jiang and Phoong, 2023). In the conditions of the development at an unprecedented rate of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the management of the tourism destinations sought to rapidly adapt by integrating smart technologies into the physical infrastructure of the destination, for example, by using smart tourism applications (Gretzel, 2022). Different studies (e.g., Corte et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2020) pointed out the importance of smart tourism destination (STD) applications in applying an effective management and marketing to destinations. Due to the relationship between STD applications and travel experiences – on the demand side and destination competitive advantage – on the supply side, the topic remains current in academic research (Ercan, 2023). Moreover, the diversity of the smart prerequisites and the results of the implementation of the smart technologies within tourist destinations makes it necessary to analyze the current stage in STD development from the point of view of different generations of tourism consumers (Karakaş et al., 2022), different in terms of level of technology acceptance and readiness (Smith and Padilla, 2023).

This study attempts to explore how individuals from different generations perceive their smart tourism experience at a recently visited destination. As different scholars pointed out (e.g., Kuchumov, Karpova, and Testina, 2024), tourists essentially utilize technology to assist and mediate the processes related to their travel. Any travel experience is strongly marked by digitalization used, for example, to find tourism facilities, the way to a tourist destination, or tourist attractions and events in a specific area. Moreover, tourism recommendations through social networking services influence tourists' decisions to visit a destination. Despite this largely recognized technology interaction among tourists, there is a relatively under researched area, particularly regarding different generational cohorts. Based on the existing literature, this study was designed to gain an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of an STD as it is perceived by people born between 1946 and 2010. Alongside the birth year, all four generations (i.e., Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z) play influential roles in shaping the tourism industry and successfully managing any tourist destination. Bearing in mind that a further increase in the use of technology in tourism is foreseen, identifying the strengths and the weaknesses of a tourist destination influenced by technology is essential in maintaining competitiveness in the tourism market.

This paper is divided into five parts. The first part introduces the paper, followed by the analysis of the specialized literature in the second section. The third section presents the methodology, followed by the findings and discussion in the fourth section and the conclusions in the fifth.

2. Analysis of specialized literature

2.1. The Smart Tourism Destination

Given that tourism represents a digital pioneer, the fact that it brought global flights and hotel booking online, it is not surprising that smart tourism destinations (STDs) quickly became a topic of great interest, as many studies show (Buhalis, 2019; Ye, Ye and Law, 2020; Hamid et al., 2021; Gretzel, 2022; Jiang and Phoong, 2023; El Archi et al., 2023; Kuchumov, Karpova and Testina, 2024). In a tourist destination viewed by the World Tourism Organization as a place that has a set of natural and cultural resources, infrastructure, and services that attract visitors, the smart dimension serves as a bridge between all these components and tourists through mobile technologies and tourism applications as the core technology (Doricic, Komsic and Markovic, 2019). After Gretzel et al. (2016), a tourism destination may be considered a smart one if it has both “hard” intelligence (i.e., the whole technological infrastructure) and “soft” intelligence (organizational skills, technological collaborations and partnerships, digital innovation). The Internet of Things (IoT), big data, social media, recommendation systems, augmented reality (Hamid et al., 2021), mobile applications, cloud computing, virtual reality (Tavitiyaman et al., 2021), and artificial intelligence (Kirtil and Aşkun, 2021) are discussed in the literature as leading tourism destinations technology. New virtual and augmented reality aspects enhance tourism technology (Wibisono et al., 2023). Through these technologies, STD marketers seek to improve the quality or value of the tourists` experiences (Um and Chung, 2021) and to increase long-term competitiveness for long-term tourism destinations (Tavitiyaman, 2021).

2.2. Tourism destination technology - strengths and weaknesses

Ye, Ye, and Law (2020) and Kusdibyo et al. (2023) showed that the adoption of smart tourism technology has an important role in influencing potential tourists to visit a destination. The STD touristic services logic is to reach the determined targets (e.g., the level of profitability) by providing fast, accurate, and personalized answers to tourists` needs using technical solutions (Hernández-Martin, Rodriguez-Rodriguez and Gahr, 2017). In other words, we can talk about STD strengths perceived by tourists (Ban et al., 2022), comparing the actual technological offer and expectations formed from previous touristic experiences and preset standards in terms of intelligent technologies. As Oliver (1980), by his expectations-disconfirmation model, stated, an individual is satisfied if the purchased product or service expresses at least the expected performance, leading to a positive disconfirmation. Different scholars have shown that satisfaction should be evaluated, considering the overall tourism experience (Spreng, Mackenzie, and Olshavsky, 1996; Assaker, Vinzi, and O'Connor, 2011). As Gajdošik (2018) highlighted, smart technologies are used by tourists in all travel phases, starting from the pre-travel information search stage to post-travel evaluations. However,

satisfaction should be understood, first of all, as a fulfillment an individual might have with STD attributes (Alegre and Garau, 2010), and its overall satisfaction being the result of the experience had with each attribute (e.g., free public Wi-Fi, official apps, QR code facility, crowd handling, online recommendation system, smart forecast) (Romao et al., 2015).

As satisfaction represents the sense of fulfillment felt by the tourism consumer, dissatisfaction is its inseparable opposite within the same continuum of the touristic experience. According to Fuller and Matzler (2008), STD` attribute perceived as a smart performance characteristic can go both ways, generating satisfaction when it performs optimally or dissatisfaction when it fails to live up to customer expectations. For example, Gan and Cheablam (2022) found that tourists are quite satisfied with the tourism platform services, but at the same time, tourists are very dissatisfied with the platform construction aspects of the tourist scenic spot. Consequently, the guide service which the smart scenic spot can maintain can be considered as a strength and the lack of a multimedia display as a weakness.

2.3. Different Generations and Tourism Technology

People from all generations' acceptance and trust are elements of particular importance in stakeholders' decision-making regarding the design of any STD (Smith and Padilla, 2023). According to the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), a person's perceived probability of adopting the technology depends directly on the expected performance in terms of perceived usefulness, presumed effort, social influence, and propitious conditions. Indirectly, technology acceptance and readiness depend on the user's age, gender, experience, and voluntariness (Marikyan and Papagiannidis, 2023). Tsai, Chang, and Ho's study (2016) revealed that age significantly affects technology's perceived ease of use and usefulness. It is well recognized (e.g., Pásztor and Bak, 2020) that members of different generations exhibit substantially different relations with technology. However, utilitarian motivation is common for all generations (Smith and Padilla, 2023). Consequently, a technological characterization of generational differences and similarities (as seen in Table 1) appears necessary to help smart tourism destination marketers cater to and simultaneously place a mix of guests.

Table 1. A short characterization of studied generational cohorts.

	Baby Boomers (b. 1946-1964)	Generation X (b. 1965-1979)	Generation Y (b. 1980-1994)	Generation Z (b. 1995-2009)
Age (in 2024)	60 years old or over	59-45	44-29	28 years old or less
Relation with technology	Digital accepters that actively utilize smartphones, social media, and cloud services.	Digital immigrants that have had to adapt to the new language of technology.	Digital natives who are comfortable with the technology they were raised with.	Digital residents: technology is second nature and fundamental to their existence.

	Baby Boomers (b. 1946-1964)	Generation X (b. 1965-1979)	Generation Y (b. 1980-1994)	Generation Z (b. 1995-2009)
State	They are at their peak travel, possess a lot of life and travel experience, financially comfortable, and plenty of free time to travel.	They are settled, for the most part, into their life`s work, and seem to stand out as a less than confident cohort when it comes to their financial situation.	They account for the largest demographic of travelers, and most Generation Y members report feeling overwhelmed by financial problems.	In general, they represents young professionals and full-time students without children, who have witnessed a growing demand for financial security
Social media habits	- they are on board with Facebook, followed by YouTube and Instagram. Facebook is visited several times a week and even a few times a day.	- used social media a few times a day (especially YouTube and Pinterest), while a minority use it all the time or a few times a week	- social media is an essential part of their lives; most of them already used new platforms, such as MetaThreads	- social media is more than half of Gen Zers` lives; Snapchat tops TikTok in popularity, while Instagram boasts the largest Gen Z user base.

Source: Tsai, Chang, and Ho, 2016; Taherdoost, 2018; Dorcic, Komsic and Markovic, 2019; American Association of Retired Persons, 2020; Jeong and Shin, 2020; Hamid et al. 2021; Smith and Padilla, 2023; Botezat et al., 2024

3. Methodology

In the current study, the main objective was to identify where ICTs generational differences and similarities lie in terms of perceived smart destinations strengths and weaknesses to help marketers to cater a mix of guests. To achieve this goal, the authors opted for a qualitative approach using data obtained from 911 Romanian respondents from February to mid-June 2023. Specifically, by trained university students, 69 Baby Boomers, 149 Generation X, 271 Generation Y, and 422 members of the Generation Z were reached through purposive sampling. According to Chaney, Touzani, and ben Slimane (2017), the sampling method was based on a generational level, rather than the conventional demographic level (i.e., age). Consequently, based on the respondent's age, each individual was included in the corresponding generational cohort for further obtained data analysis. To this end, for data analyzing the MAXQDA Analytics Pro Analysis has been adopted. MAXQDA Analytics Pro, part of the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CADAS) family (Kuckartz et al., 2019), was used to conduct a qualitative content analysis based on a text coding system for open-ended questions. The

concepts in the text that are relevant to the ongoing research are standardized using the coding system provided by the software. The frequency of codes and the code clouds were subsequently generated and interpreted using the identified codes as a basis.

The questionnaire used in this study consists of three parts. The first part collected general demographic data and information on tourism experience, especially birth year. Only respondents who consent to participate in the study and have visited a tourism destination in the last two years were asked to respond. The second part consists of questions covering respondents' perceptions and opinions about smart touristic destination strengths and weaknesses, and the third part contains more detailed socio-demographic data, such as gender, occupation, level of education, vacation frequency, travel motives, and income level. The collected data related to respondents' perceptions and opinions about last visited smart touristic destination strengths and weaknesses was treated and systematically analyzed through deductive content analysis. Keeping in mind the guidelines outlined by Schreier (2014), the data collected from the respondents were carefully read and contrasted until significant patterns emerged in correspondence with the research questions focused on identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the most recently visited tourist destination.

4. Findings

The qualitative analysis examined the matches and mismatches in smart tourism experiences and the ICTs mediated interactions among the four investigated generations. Table 2 presents the overall number and percentage of respondents indicating strengths and weaknesses. It should be noted that, overall, for all four generations considered, the number of respondents who identified strengths is higher than those who mentioned weaknesses. More than 70% of Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y respondents and 65% of Generation Z respondents indicated at least one strength, while about 50% of Baby Boomers, Generation Y and Generation Z respondents and 65% of Generation X respondents indicated at least one weakness. As these were not mandatory questions, the fact that a significant number of respondents chose to indicate at least one strength and/or weakness regarding using technology in their travel-related activities may lead to the conclusion that these aspects are of considerable importance to them.

Table 2. Overall situation of responses indicating strengths and weaknesses

	Total respondents	Strengths		Weaknesses	
		No of respondents indicating strengths	%	No of respondents indicating weaknesses	%
Baby Boomers	69	50	72.46%	36	52.17%

Generation X	149	108	72.48%	98	65.77%
Generation Y	271	195	71.96%	132	48.71%
Generation Z	422	275	65.17%	206	48.82%

Source: created by authors

4.1. Strengths of smart tourism destinations indicated by different generations.

Table 3 shows responses of the four generations related to *the strengths* of smart tourism destinations, ranked by frequency in descending order. *All the four-generation respondents mentioned online payments, WIFI, free internet, and online reservations.* However, there are some differences between the generations in their evaluation level. Baby Boomers and Generation X respondents put online payments in the first place and higher ranking (18.18% - Baby Boomers and 15.73% - Generation X) than Generation Y and Generation Z respondents, who placed this strength on the second place (15.18% - Generation Y, and 8.92% - Generation Z). WIFI was ranked in first place by 19.64% of Generation Y respondents and 15.96% by Generation Z respondents, and third place by Baby Boomers and Generation X respondents (12.12% and 8.99%). Free internet was highly mentioned as the strength of the smart tourism destination by Baby Boomers (18.18% of respondents), followed by Generation Y (8.93%), Generation X with 5.62%, and Generation Z with the smallest percentage (2.82%). Online reservations tend to be highly pointed out by Generation Y, followed by Generation X, Baby Boomers, and Generation Z. Easy to use, mobile applications, and online booking were strengths mentioned by three of four generation respondents, and websites, virtual maps, and google maps by two generations of respondents. It is interesting to observe that Generation Z and Baby Boomers highly consider easy-to-use, Generation X online booking, and Generation X and Z mobile applications. The ability to purchase tickets online is regarded as a significant strength by respondents from generations Y and Z.

Table 3. Ranking of strengths of smart tourism destination

	Baby Boomers		Generation X		Generation Y		Generation Z	
	Keyword (Kw)	fq %	Keyword (Kw)	fq %	Keyword (Kw)	fq %	Keyword (Kw)	fq %
1	Online payments	18.18	Online payments	15.73	WIFI	19.64	WIFI	15.96
2	Free internet	18.18	Online booking	10.11	Online payments	15.18	Online payments	8.92
3	WIFI	12.12	WIFI	8.99	Free internet	8.93	websites	8.45
4	Virtual maps	9.09	mobile applications	6.74	websites	5.36	mobile applications	4.69
5	GPS system	6.06	Strong WIFI	6.74	online purchase of tickets	5.36	Easy to use	4.69
6	Easy to use	6.06	websites	5.62	Card entry	4.46	Online booking	4.69
7	card payments	6.06	Free internet	5.62	online reservations	3.57	Virtual maps	4.23
8	Weather notifications	6.06	alerts	4.49	Online booking	3.57	Transport applications	4.23
9	alerts	3.03	Easy to use	4.49	menu using the QR code	2.68	Google Maps	3.76
10	Virtual reality	3.03	smart technology	4.49	Google Maps	1.79	online purchase of tickets	3.76
11	Good phone signal	3.03	online reservations	3.37	smart electronic device	1.79	smart technology	3.76
12	online reservations	3.03	waze	3.37	safety	1.79	Free internet	2.82
13	cable channels	3.03	card payments	2.25	mobile applications	1.79	Virtual guide	2.35
14	Intelligent systems	3.03	online ads	2.25	Strong WIFI	1.79	calendar of events	2.35
15.	-		GPS system	2.25	-		online reservations	2.35

Source: created by authors

4.2. Weaknesses of smart tourism destinations indicated by different generations

The weaknesses list of smart tourist destinations displays the keywords considered most relevant, as indicated by the four generations of respondents. Table 4 summarizes their responses ranked by frequency in descending order. Interestingly, Table 4 shows that *weak WIFI signal* is the most frequently recurring attribute when discussing weaknesses of smart tourism destinations. Moreover, all the four-generation respondents ranked *weak WIFI signals* in the first place and shared over 20.00% of statistics. Further, three of four generations mentioned *no Internet signal*, specifically 12.00% of Baby Boomers, 10.71% of Generation X, and 6.72% of Generation Z respondents. Results also show that 12.00% of Baby Boomers respondents, 7.61% of Generation Y, and 5.22% of Generation X respondents have reported *monitoring tourist flow* as a weakness of the last visited tourism destination. In contrast, none of the Generation X respondents mentioned it.

Additionally, Baby Boomers and Generation Y mentioned *managing the number of visitors* as a weakness, precisely 4.00% Baby Boomers and 3.26% of Generation Y respondents. Among Baby Boomers, *call center services not available*, and *hard to use* are ranked five and six in line as weaknesses, while *no online payments* are at the bottom of the list. Generation X respondents share similar perceptions regarding call center service not available and hard to use, being more critical regarding no online payments. Generation Y and Generation Z respondents do not mention these last three attributes as weaknesses but pointed out the *absence of a tourist events calendar*. Overall, while some general Internet-related issues (weak or no signal, limited WIFI) predominate in the lists of weaknesses for all four generations, some specific issues (monitoring tourist flow, professional websites, public transportation applications, services for people with disabilities, events calendar) are also mentioned, albeit less frequently.

Table 4. Ranking of weaknesses of smart tourism destination.

	Baby Boomers		Generation X		Generation Y		Generation Z	
	Keyword (Kw)	fq %	Keyword (Kw)	fq %	Keyword (Kw)	fq %	Keyword (Kw)	fq %
1	Weak WIFI signal	20.00	Weak WIFI signal	28.57	Weak WIFI signal	26.09	Weak WIFI signal	20.90
2	no Internet signal	12.00	call center service not available	14.29	no intelligent technology	13.04	no Internet signal	6.72
3	poor web presence	12.00	no Internet signal	10.71	lack of information applications	9.78	Limited WIFI	5.22
4	monitoring tourist flow	12.00	Lack of attractions information	7.14	no online payments	7.61	monitoring tourist flow	5.22

	Baby Boomers		Generation X		Generation Y		Generation Z	
	Keyword (Kw)	fq %	Keyword (Kw)	fq %	Keyword (Kw)	fq %	Keyword (Kw)	fq %
5	call center service not available	8.00	Hard to use apps	7.14	monitoring tourist flow	7.61	not functional technology	4.48
6	Hard to use	8.00	parking monitoring	7.14	Problematic applications	6.52	Public transportation application	4.48
7	no intelligent technology	8.00	no online payments	7.14	weak phone signal	5.43	lack of a professional website	3.74
8	little information for tourists	4.00	no online reservation	3.57	managing the number of visitors	3.26	absence of a tourist events calendar	3.73
9	managing the number of visitors	4.00	Lack of reviews	3.57	absence of services for people with disabilities	3.26	lack of information applications	3.73
10	Limited WIFI	4.00	lack of augmented reality application	3.57	absence of a tourist events calendar	3.26	little information for tourists	2.99
11	no online payments	4.00	no card payments	3.57	the absence of sustainable technologies	3.26	not updated info	2.99
12	missing alerts	4.00	missing alerts	3.57	Lack of smart devices	2.17	Lack of technology	2.99

Source: created by authors

5. Conclusions

This study points out that there are generally more intergenerational similarities than differences related to tourists' perceptions of smart technology. Respondents from all four studied generations highlighted the importance of an appropriate digital infrastructure aimed at creating travel satisfaction. Aside from more wireless networking technology that uses radio waves to provide free wireless high-speed Internet access (Wi-Fi), smart tourism destination marketers should consider the quality of the Internet signal and the mobile apps that contribute to a more comfortable and secure travel. These findings strengthen some previous studies' focus on technologies used in tourist attractions (Wang et al., 2016), gadgets and platforms used in smart tourism destinations (Başer, Doğan and Al-Turjman, 2019),

and ICT's individual and social experience utility (Ballina, Valdes and Del Valle, 2019). Another very important aspect is that for all four generations, a smart destination tourism attribute (e.g., free Wi-Fi, online payments) was considered a strength when it met tourists' expectations and a weak point when it disappointed, which is in line with Gan and Cheablam' study (2022) results.

From a qualitative approach, the current study evidenced some generational differences related to the technological performance of tourism destinations. For example, older generations (Baby Boomers and Generation X) considered 'easy to use' as a strength and 'hard to use' as a tourism destination weakness, while younger generations did not. This confirms other studies, such as Kim et al. (2016). Another aspect that can be mentioned is the fact that younger generations (i.e., Generation Y and Generation Z) seem to be more dependent on their technological devices since they mentioned 'lack of information applications' as an important smart destination' weakness. The virtual experience was specified as a weakness by Generation Y respondents, and 'problematic applications' by those who belong to Generation Z. 'Absence of services for people with disabilities' was indicated as a weakness both by Generation Y and Generation Z respondents. This finding was not expected by these younger generations but by the older ones, who unexpectedly did not mention it. A possible explanation consists in that young people might consider whether they could recommend or revisit the destination accompanied by seniors, while those seniors that travel seek dynamism and youth, and some of them loathe services for people with disabilities. A limitation of our study consists in the fact that the sample for this research consists only of Romanians and thus deals with only one cultural nation. This may make our findings less generalizable to other countries.

The implications of our findings for tourism destination marketers are important: smart tourism destination attributes influence the result of the touristic experience for all generations of tourists. Thus, simply providing tourists with standard ICT technology may not be sufficient to gain full benefits. Tourism destination management should improve the technological infrastructure to ensure more quality connectivity for any tourist destination. Additionally, smart tourism destination stakeholders, as well as application developers, should create functional solutions to attract the target generational group(s).

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