

PROVIDING A CLEAR FOUNDATION FOR SMART DESTINATIONS



Smart destinations focus on delivering highly personalized tourist experiences that are context-specific.



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Smart destinations are a nascent and growing category in destination marketing but suffer from a lack of clarity. What is a 'smart destination'? UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management's Dr. Youcheng Wang and Dr. Alan Fyall led an international team of hospitality management specialists tasked with providing a clear foundation for smart destination researchers and practitioners. Their study, published in the *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, provides significant insight and stokes the fire beneath destination marketing organizations.

It is undeniable that 'smart destinations' are becoming an increasingly popular offering in any innovative destination marketing organization's portfolio. However, what is unresolved is what a 'smart destination' is exactly. It is a broad term referring to a nascent destination category; a clear definition is needed. Two researchers from UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management have accepted the challenge, together with their colleagues. They are part of an international team of specialists who developed a conceptual framework for smart destinations which draws on data from real-world case studies and expert opinions. One of the key outcomes should make destination marketing organizations sit up and rethink their role.

In hospitality parlance, a 'smart destination' uses technology and innovation to enhance the visitor experience, optimize resource use, and improve the destination's sustainability and competitiveness. The term weaves together current and emerging expressions of I.T., governance, and environmental responsibility. But as an evolving and increasingly important category, it lacks a clear definition to guide implementation and, importantly, research. To date, studies under the broad umbrella of smart destination research have focused on diverse components, including I.T.

connectivity and interoperability, personalized experiences, the liveability of communities, sustainability, and the role of entrepreneurs. The accumulated knowledge is fragmented which is problematic. More precise operational definitions in research are integral to the practical implementation and accurate evaluation of smart initiatives. Definitions are also critical for one of the essential stakeholders in promoting and coordinating tourism experiences at smart destinations—the destination marketing organization (DMO).

Clarifying exactly what a 'smart destination' is a challenge that merited investigation by Dr. Youcheng Wang, the dean and preeminent chair professor in destination marketing at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management, Dr. Alan Fyall, the associate dean of academic affairs and chair professor of tourism marketing, and a team of other specialists in hospitality management from the U.S. and the U.K. The researchers understood that if they were to

design a conceptual framework to guide the hospitality sector's understanding of a smart destination, they needed to evaluate current concepts around the term, examine their implementation in the field, and recognize the input of diverse stakeholders. Because the DMO plays a critical role in tying all this together, it is a keystone organization, and therefore the researchers realized that it should be at the center of their analysis.

THE FOUR PILLARS OF A SMART DESTINATION FRAMEWORK

Tracing the origins of smart destinations to the development of smart cities, Drs. Wang, Fyall, and their colleagues proposed four pillars to form the foundations of a smart destination framework: I.T. infrastructure, e-governance, sustainability, and liveability. State-of-the-art technology is vital for smart destinations,

and its 'smartness' depends on the level and interconnectedness of the Internet of Things (IoT)—a network of physical objects that interact via the Internet—cloud services, and end-user services such as mobile apps. The connectivity of all three is critical for smart tourism systems to be able to function.

Connectivity is also vital for collaboration between the stakeholders who are responsible for governing a smart destination—hence the term 'e-governance.' For the researchers, e-governance entails using intelligence to help tourism entities function effectively within the emerging smart ecosystem in a way that respects the needs of not only visitors to a destination, but also those of the pre-existing residents. This is tied to the third pillar—sustainability. In this study, the researchers' definition of sustainability is not limited to environmental and ecological issues, but also includes social, cultural, and economic concerns. Integrating these helps secure the fourth pillar—liveability. Within the scope of the researchers' investigation, a smart destination is safe for tourists and residents alike and encourages mobility, opportunity, and engagement within the destination.

AS AN EVOLVING AND INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT CATEGORY, IT LACKS A CLEAR DEFINITION TO GUIDE IMPLEMENTATION AND, IMPORTANTLY, RESEARCH.

The study presents a framework for future research and practice, to help build a future for smart destinations.



The connections between the four pillars are complex, hence the importance of DMOs which have the necessary fundamental technological framework—a web-based destination marketing system (DMS)—to coordinate and facilitate those connections. Importantly for the researchers, DMSs are also data-rich. Drs. Wang, Fyall, and colleagues turned to four leading DMOs that integrate some of the latest technologies in web-based destination management and marketing: Visit Britain, Visit the U.S.A., Visit Manchester, and Discover Hong Kong. The researchers analyzed all the information on the DMO websites, including textual, visual, audio information,

evaluate and develop the framework and provide insight on the technologies that could impact the future of smart destinations. They interviewed ten DMO representatives, two representatives of city councils from popular tourist destinations, seven academic experts, and two industry professionals. In principle, the stakeholders supported the framework and drew on their expertise, insights, and diverse priorities to add the necessary fine-tuning. Among the critical points of emphasis was the need for inclusivity—a smart destination is not just for the benefit of tourists—and that personalizing experiences should be about more than customizing—they should

real-time.’ The researchers add that ‘Smart destinations focus on delivering highly personalized tourist experiences that are context-specific, and include serendipity or random and exciting discovery elements.’

In this way, smart destinations can balance the needs of local communities as well as visitors, create sustainable and responsible tourism, generate an authentic aspirational brand, and ensure ease of access to attractions through affordable and smart technologies.

EXPECTATIONS OF LEADERSHIP

The research also identified specific smart technologies largely unconsidered in other studies, notably robotics and autonomous vehicle technology, AI-based systems, and specific domains of practice that could be important to smart destinations, namely crowd and traffic control. These have largely eluded previous research. It also highlighted some uncomfortable realities, notably that even though the DMOs selected for the study were leaders in their class, they still trailed behind expectations for integrating increasingly widespread technologies such as immersive technologies.

A significant development of the study was that it identified how DMOs fit into the smart destination framework. While previous studies have recognized the coordinating function of DMOs and, thus, their key role in the development of smart tourism and smart destinations, this study made it clear that the role of DMOs is far more important. The findings suggested that DMOs had a leadership responsibility—they were expected to be at the forefront and instrumental in launching smart tourism initiatives. With their institutional knowledge, coordinating approach, technological capacity, and centralized platforms, these organizations have what is needed to integrate the multitude of smart functions to power and steer smart destinations.

If DMOs are to play a leadership role in shaping and developing smart destinations, the research of Drs. Wang, Fyall, and colleagues provide the necessary direction. But their study does more than that. It also presents a framework for future research and practice—a clear foundation for tourism academics and practitioners to help build a future for smart destinations.

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDY WAS PROBABLY ABOUT HOW DMOs FIT INTO THE SMART DESTINATION FRAMEWORK.

and then coded it using MAXQDA software according to function and ‘smartness’ with respect to brand promotion, transaction, information, relationship, and communication. In total, they arrived at over 10,000 coded segments and a data-supported guideline for the next step of their study.

THE POWER OF SERENDIPITY

With a basic proposed framework in place and data from the DMSs as context, the researchers turned to leading industry stakeholders to

include random, exciting novel experiences to lure visitors away from over-prescribed destinations. A term emerged for this: the power of serendipity.

Tying together the quantitative and qualitative data, Drs. Wang, Fyall, and colleagues developed the following definition: ‘A smart destination is one where the application of the technology is ubiquitous and ensured through a myriad of available technologies interconnected with the infrastructure in

RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Drs. Wang, Fyall, and colleagues identify and quantify a conceptual framework for smart tourist destinations.

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

This study provides a clear foundation for smart destination research; how would you like to see it developed?

“ The study is only a starting point in the conceptualization of smart destination, it will be interesting to see how destinations at various levels in different regions will formulate and implement smart destination strategies to enhance efficiency and experiences. This can be an exciting albeit challenging task owing to the multi-stakeholder nature of destination management at the macro level, and a wide range of facilitating and inhibiting factors affecting the adoption and implementation of smart initiatives at the individual business levels, including recourse availability, management support, innovativeness, and technology capability. ”

Dr. Youcheng Wang



Dr. Youcheng Wang is the Dean and preeminent chair professor in destination marketing at the Rosen College of Hospitality Management at University of Central Florida and a fellow of the International Academy for the Study of Tourism. He is also the co-editor of *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*.

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