

Chapter 12

Smart Tourism and Local Heritage: Phygital Experiences and the Development of Geotourism Routes

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary society is sustained by a growing digitalization of social processes, with exponential growth in the uses of ICT, which opened up new interaction possibilities with objects and places. In the field of tourism, these technological developments have given rise to the emergence of new concepts: smart tourism, smart destinations, smart experiences, and smart heritage. These concepts and their implications for the success of tourist activities are discussed first, and then the focus of analysis is shifted to the local tourism resources and characteristics. The case study focuses on the municipality of São Pedro do Sul, an area located in the Viseu Dão Lafões subregion, within the Central Region of Portugal. Several low-cost digital strategies are proposed to enrich tourism activities based on endogenous cultural and natural resources and empower route tourism as a relevant strategy for diversifying tourism and support the sustainable development of local communities based on a digital application that aims to integrate storytelling in the territorial context under study.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technology in recent decades has opened up new possibilities for humans to interact with objects and places. In the field of tourism, these technological developments have given rise to the emergence of several new concepts: smart tourism, smart destinations, smart experiences, and smart heritage. Information technology increasingly mediates interactions between visitors or tourists and the places they choose to visit. Mobile information services can enrich the tourism experience with a digital memory of the region and its heritage, enabling the delivery of innovative services and making touristic offerings more creative, accessible, and intuitive.

In most tourist destinations, the ubiquity of information, interconnectivity, and the ability to customize services to user preferences are revolutionizing the way people explore territories and heritage sites. In recent years, several examples of tourism services have been identified that are supported by multi-sensory interactive platforms enabling varying degrees of immersive experience, while delivering increasingly personalized relations with physical places and cultures.

After discussing the concepts of smart tourism, smart destinations, smart experiences, and their implications for the success of tourism activities, the focus of attention is changed to deal with resources and current characteristics of tourism at the local level. The case study focuses on the municipality of São Pedro do Sul, an area located in the Viseu Dão Lafões subregion, within the Central Region of Portugal. This is a municipality characterized by very contrasted landscapes, with vast mountain rural areas very sparsely populated and riverside sectors where the main population clusters are concentrated. The tourism activity is key to the local economy of São Pedro do Sul, especially considering that other alternatives are currently less viable. For example, the largest local enterprise is Termalístur – Termas de São Pedro do Sul, E.M., S.A., the management company for the city's thermal spas and all related activity.

Methodologically, the option fell on the description of the most relevant characteristics of the territory of São Pedro do Sul, as well as on the graphic representation of some data to characterize the tourist demand in this municipality. The present reality reflects a high spatial concentration of tourism activity, so the main objective of this work is to highlight the importance of digital technology in reconfiguring cultural and natural tourism experiences, particularly in relation to the promotion of touristic routes, which are of paramount importance in attracting visitors and tourists to those less accessible, rural areas. Based on the local cultural and natural resources, several low-cost digital strategies are proposed to enrich this type of tourism and, simultaneously, empower route tourism as a relevant means to diversify tourism and support the sustainable development of local communities. Starting by analyzing the communication tools currently available, it is particularly important to highlight the importance of social networks as platforms for information exchange and up-to-date contracts between tourist agents operating in the territory of São Pedro do Sul and the various customer segments potentially interested in the offer available. These types of platforms may also be an important source of information to feed the proposed digital application prototype, which aims to integrate stories and digital storytelling in the territorial context under study – the *phygital* experience.

SMART TOURISM AND SMART DESTINATIONS

The *smart* expression has been increasingly common in recent years. In very simple terms, it denotes the integration of advanced information and communication technologies into products and services.

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