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What is a Smart Destination in Practice? The Interpretation of DMO Managers from Spanish World Heritage Cities

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Abstract

This work intends to identify how Spanish World Heritage Cities (SWHC) are interpreting and implementing the Smart Destination Spanish Model (SD). The model has been created as a new paradigm of tourist management, and it is being sponsored by the Spanish public administration in different destinations, including Spanish World Heritage Cities. SWHC are historic, major tourist destinations with a large number of visitors. A sequence of qualitative methods has been used, consisting of documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews. The destination managers from each of the 15 cities that take part of the World Heritage Cities Spanish Group have been interviewed. In addition, an executive of the government-owned Tourism Innovation and Technologies company (SEGITTUR) has been also interviewed. The results do highlight the momentum that the model has reached, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and serve to identify what kind of strategies have been put in practice.

Keywords: smart destinations; World Heritage Cities; Destination Management Organizations; smart tourism cities; Spanish World Heritage Cities Group; Covid-19.

1. Introduction

Information technology (IT) is redefining the structure of competition and the tourism industry (Xiang, 2018). The importance of technology as a strategic tool for tourism has long been known due to the tourist's use of IT at all stages of the travel experience and the fact that the tourism industry thrives on information (Benckendorff *et al.*, 2019). As a consequence, there is a growing consensus that we are entering an era of so-called smart tourism (Gretzel, Sigala, *et al.*, 2015). In this context of structural change in tourist activity, conventional planning models are in crisis. Thus, new models to manage and plan tourism destinations are needed in a situation that is "a crossroads on the theoretical-conceptual, political, and applied levels" (Ivars-Baidal & Vera Rebollo,

2019, p. 8).

Conceptually, the smart destination model has emerged as a new planning and management approach (Ivars-Baidal *et al.*, 2019; Jovicic, 2016). Its main purpose is the integration of physical and technological infrastructure to create seamless experiences for tourists, while improving the quality of life for residents as well (Sorokina et al., 2022). The digital revolution has led to "knowledge-based destinations, in which knowledge and information are accessible to all stakeholders, allowing them to carry out continuous innovation of their performance and activities, as much as possible" (Jovicic, 2016, p. 454) and, building and maintaining the competitiveness of a destination (Koo *et al.*, 2016). Due to its importance, Ivars et al. (2019) believe that the concept requires greater conceptual precision to become a new paradigm for destination management. However, empirical findings assessing the real impact of this approach in specific destinations are scarce (Femenia-Serra & Ivars-Baidal, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to limit the meaning of smart destinations from the practical point of view; the theoretical concept will become a reality in this way (Ivars-Baidal & Femenia-Serra, 2020) and will advance in its application.

On the political and institutional level, several countries such as Spain, South Korea, and China have laid out policies for developing smart destinations (SD) (Gretzel, Sigala, *et al.*, 2015; Lee *et al.*, 2018), though, among all, Spain likely boasts the most renowned case due to its institutional commitment and the creation of specific lines of funding, support programs, and long-term strategies (OECD, 2018). The smart destination program developed in Spain by SEGITTUR, defines the smart destination as follows:

> A tourism destination that is innovative, sustainable, and accessible to everyone is based on an infrastructure of state-of-the-art technology that increases the quality

> of the experience at the destination and improves residents' quality of life (SEGITTUR, 2015, p. 31).

This is a great vision for a tourism destination, but making it a reality is difficult (Ivars-Baidal *et al.*, 2019). Gradually, smart destinations have gone from an idealistic concept to progressive consolidation as a new management approach (Femenia-Serra et al., 2019; Ivars-Baidal & Femenia-Serra, 2020). Although the differentiating factor resides in technology and data as innovation in contrast to destination models, sustainability, accessibility, and governance are also important axes of smart destinations (Ivars-Baidal & Femenia-Serra, 2020). However, research and industry practice are focused on technology aspects, with little evident concern for the remaining related aspects (Gretzel & Collier de Mendonça, 2019).

In the case of Spain, ten years after the Secretary of State for Tourism (SETUR) launched the smart destination project, experiences of tourist destinations are so far partial and limited, especially in heritage destinations, despite the attention they have garnered. In acknowledgement of these research gaps, the objective of this paper is to know how SWHCs are interpreting and implementing smart destination strategies. From this main objective the following specific objectives arise:

(1) To create a semantic network of the SD concept based on the interpretation made by local tourism planners (without mediating and with questions about the models' five axes)
(2) To understand the trajectory of the destinations in the adoption of the SD model
(3) To determine the factors facilitating SD strategies or creating barriers
(4) To evaluate the implementation of the model considering the situation caused by COVID

Additionally, the following research questions are proposed:

Q1 Is the Smart Destination model a disruption or an evolution in destination management?

Q2 Do destination managers have a concise image of the SD concept and its implications?

Q3 Do destination managers consider SD in a holistic or technocentric way?

Q4. What is the assessment made by those who manage the application of the concept and to what degree do they adhere to institutional programs financed in the current post-pandemic crisis?

To achieve these objectives, we chose qualitative methods. Firstly, we revised all the documentation on smart destinations, or smart city projects related to tourism. The literature review was carried out via a search in the SCOPUS database and the information available from previous experiences. Secondly, we interviewed destination managers from each of the 15 cities that make up the Word Heritage Cities Spanish Group.

This study contributes on several levels. It provides a clear picture of how urban heritage destinations are addressing the smart destination model. Despite the importance of World Heritage Cities as tourist destinations, there is hardly any work on their conversion into smart destinations. Although there are many theoretical works on smart destinations, in this research, we have chosen to delve into how the concept of smart destination is being interpreted and put into practice by the SWHCs management teams. We assess the reality of a concept which in Spain has been promoted from a higher institutional level (SETUR and SEGITTUR) and follows a mode of policy adoption from the higher level to the lower level (top-down).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Smart tourism cities

SDs are part of the generic framework of smart tourism (ST). Gretzel (2022) defines smart tourism as "*a form of tourism development that takes advantage of advanced technologies (notably sensors, wireless communication networks, and big data analytics) to achieve sustainable development goals*" (p.3). Meanwhile, SDs are a hybrid resulting from the adaptation of the concept of smart cities to tourist destinations (Gretzel, Reino, *et al.*, 2015). The differentiating feature for conceptualizing smart destinations is the role played by technology, but this does not mean that the mere integration of technology transforms a destination into a smart one (Ivars-Baidal & Vera Rebollo, 2019). Smart destinations not only require new technological capabilities; they call for a change in the destination management paradigm (Gretzel, 2022). Smart destination development involves hard (technological infrastructure) and soft (innovation, social capital, human capital, and leadership) smartness factors that need to work together (Boes *et al.*, 2016). Meanwhile, hard capabilities are more easily acquired through finance programs or economic resources. Soft capabilities are more complex to acquire and develop due to their intangible nature.

Data is at the core of smart destinations (Gretzel, Sigala, *et al.*, 2015). Two components based on data are key in the structure and functioning of SDs: smart experience and smart business ecosystems (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Gretzel, Werthner, *et al.*, 2015). Both require planning, coordination, and implementation beyond individual tourism provider levels (Gretzel, 2022). This is in line with the networked nature of smart destinations (Del Chiappa & Baggio, 2015). It has also been seen as an adequate response from Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) to the profound transformation that the tourism system has undergone in recent years

(Ivars-Baidal & Vera Rebollo, 2019). Furthermore, there is a view of smart destinations as complex systems, in which the digital revolution enables better collaboration between tourism companies and tourists, who exchange and share information and knowledge (Jovicic, 2019). It is crucial to involve, in a dynamic manner, all agents in the areas of planning and management, following a process of experimentation and learning (Ivars-Baidal & Femenia-Serra, 2020). This approach is relevant for transforming destination management (Ivars-Baidal *et al.*, 2019).

Meanwhile, the concept of smart tourism cities arises to bring public and private sector interests together with a vision to serve both tourists and residents (P. Lee et al., 2020). Advances in technology can facilitate the convergence of urban residential and touristic spaces (Gretzel & Koo, 2021) and, with it, the classical expansion of the historic tourist city is blurred (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2011). This concept merges to form new value propositions, create new efficiencies, and facilitate better integration into the overall structures of governance (Gretzel & Koo, 2021).

2.2. Smart Destination Management Organizations

Smart tourism is redefining destination marketing and management, and consequently, the role of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) is also reformulated (Femenia-Serra & Neuhofer, 2019). Thus, they have an opportunity to strengthen their position within the tourism ecosystem (Gretzel & Scarpino-Johns, 2018). Due to their institutional nature, DMOs are critical in SDs (Femenia-Serra & Ivars-Baidal, 2021). Additionally, DMOs have a central role in the implementation of processes and can provide a common technological platform, where stakeholders can connect and interact (Sorokina et al., 2022). A DMO's functions are restructured in three areas: data as a key resource; the pursuit of sustainability and universal accessibility; and innovation as a key to management (Ivars-Baidal & Femenia-Serra, 2020). Gretzel *et al.* (Gretzel et al.,

2018) define the roles of smart DMOs as such:

> To lobby and maybe even partly sponsor the development of smart tourism infrastructure, to curate and manage smart tourism data, to facilitate development and uptake of smart tourism-related applications within the digital business ecosystem, to support tourists in learning about and consuming smart tourism experiences, and, finally, to link smart tourism with the overall quality of life and sustainability development goals" (p. 201).

Gretzel (2022) suggests that smart tourism development requires smart governance. Furthermore, she had identified six critical smart DMO functions: 1) Mobilizing resources; 2) Matchmaking; 3) Managing, facilitating, and coordinating smart tourism activities at the destination 4) Sensing 5) Introducing, through their shapeshifting, liquidity into the smart tourism ecosystem 6) Acting as stewards for their destinations (Coca-Stefaniak, 2020; Gretzel & Jamal, 2020). In addition, being an SD involves strong public-private collaboration (Gretzel, 2022; Gretzel, Sigala, *et al.*, 2015; Ivars-Baidal *et al.*, 2019; Jovicic, 2019), and requires strong leadership (Boes *et al.*, 2016), more agile organizational structures, and being better equipped in terms of economic and human resources (Ivars-Baidal *et al.*, 2019). The transition to smart tourism destinations entails changing both technology, self-concepts, and concepts of management, as well as technology and work (Gelter et al., 2022).

Ivars-Baidal *et al.* (2019) propose the concept of "smart solutions" to refer to concrete available and valuable solutions for destinations to implement from a public-oriented perspective (Femenia-Serra & Ivars-Baidal, 2021). Smart solutions can be understood as "technology-based applications and tools a smart DMO can employ to fulfil its objectives, namely enrich its visitors' experiences and its management processes" (Femenia-Serra & Ivars-Baidal, 2021, p. 366). The proposed model will be used as an interpretative framework (fig.1). In this framework, the application of smart

solutions feeds the instrumental and strategic levels of smart destinations, improving the performance of these aspects.

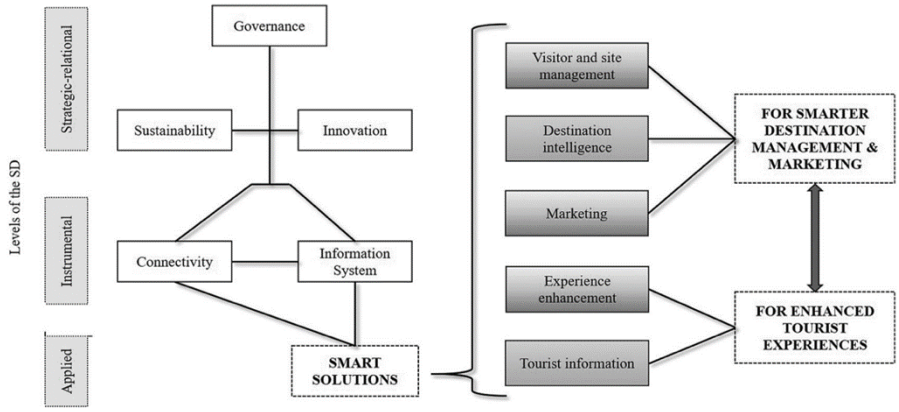


Figure 1. Smart destination solutions (Femenia-Serra & Ivars-Baidal, 2021).

In conclusion, it is a time of significant shifts in governance practices (Gretzel, 2022), and this entails adopting integrated and holistic forms of management (Fyall & Garrod, 2020).

2.3. Two decades of Destination Management Organizations in Spanish World Heritage Cities

Currently, fifteen cities make up the Group: Alcalá de Henares, Ávila, Cáceres, Córdoba, Cuenca, Eivissa, Mérida, Salamanca, Santiago de Compostela, Segovia, San Cristóbal de la Laguna, Tarragona, Toledo, Úbeda and Baeza. They do have some characteristics in common such as an importance of tourism in the local economy, an outstanding heritage, and culture facilities. However, there are also some significant differences between them, like the scale of the historical-tourist city, municipal and tourism budget, location and communication infrastructure. These features explain in part the significant differences in the number of visitors, supply development and motivations to visit. The cities of Santiago de Compostela, Córdoba, and Ibiza are well-known destinations with high volume of visitors (circa 1.5 M. overnights per year in 2019). Nonetheless, Mérida, Cuenca, and Úbeda y Baeza receive fewer visitors (under

400,000 overnights per year in 2019). Between these two figures are the remaining eight cities.

Figure 2. Map of Spain with the WHC. Source: www.ciudadespatrimonio.org

Urban tourism is an extremely important worldwide form of tourism (Ashworth & Page, 2011). Although some cities have been receiving visitors for a long time, urban tourism started to emerge in the 1990s. In Europe, cities are the key component of cultural tourism (García Hernández *et al.*, 2017) and World Heritage Cities are one of the main cultural references in Spain. However, the recent growth of tourist flows constitutes a threat to the conservation of the cities' values (García Hernández *et al.*, 2017). Thus, the sustainable development of tourism is a major concern for DMOs in heritage tourism (Mandić & Kennell, 2021).

Public tourist policies have arisen in Spanish WHCs since the late 1990s. We propose a scheme of the evolution of DMOs in general terms (Fig. 3), although it is noted that there are still marked differences within these destinations (García

Hernández, 2007). In many cities, the start-up of this policy was supported by the "destination plans", a program framed in the successive major tourist plans of the Government (Futures I, Futures II, PICTE). From 1999 to 2008 most cities created destination management organizations because of these plans. After the Great Recession, some restructuring took place in local DMOs with a more prominent role of city councils (2009-2015). Web 2.0, user-generated content, and shared economy introduced critical changes in demand, and DMOs must respond to it. Also, they created specialized bodies like the Convention Bureau or Film Offices, going beyond traditional roles of tourist information and promotion. SDs arise in some state and national Smart Cities plans since 2016 (Toledo, Segovia, Cuenca, etc.). Finally, a new generation of government plans called Sustainability Tourist Destination Plans (STDP) are financing projects that prioritize actions of SDs since 2020.

In addition, networking mechanisms have been promoted, with notable results in tourism cooperation. The Spanish World Heritage Cities Group was established in 1993, with the objective of "defending these cities' historic and cultural heritage, (…), undertaking common projects and proposals, establishing policies for exchanging experiences, and handling common problems" (www.ciudadespatrimonio.org). In 2004, the activity of the Tourism Commission of the Group was strengthened with the creation of "the Spanish World Heritage Cities Product Club". Among its objectives, the club aims to improve the touristic competitiveness of member cities, seek excellence for all activity at the destination level, promote tourism quality, and standardize operating guidelines. All Group Cities became members of the Spanish SD network in December 2020, thereby creating the first working group in the network dedicated to cultural tourism.

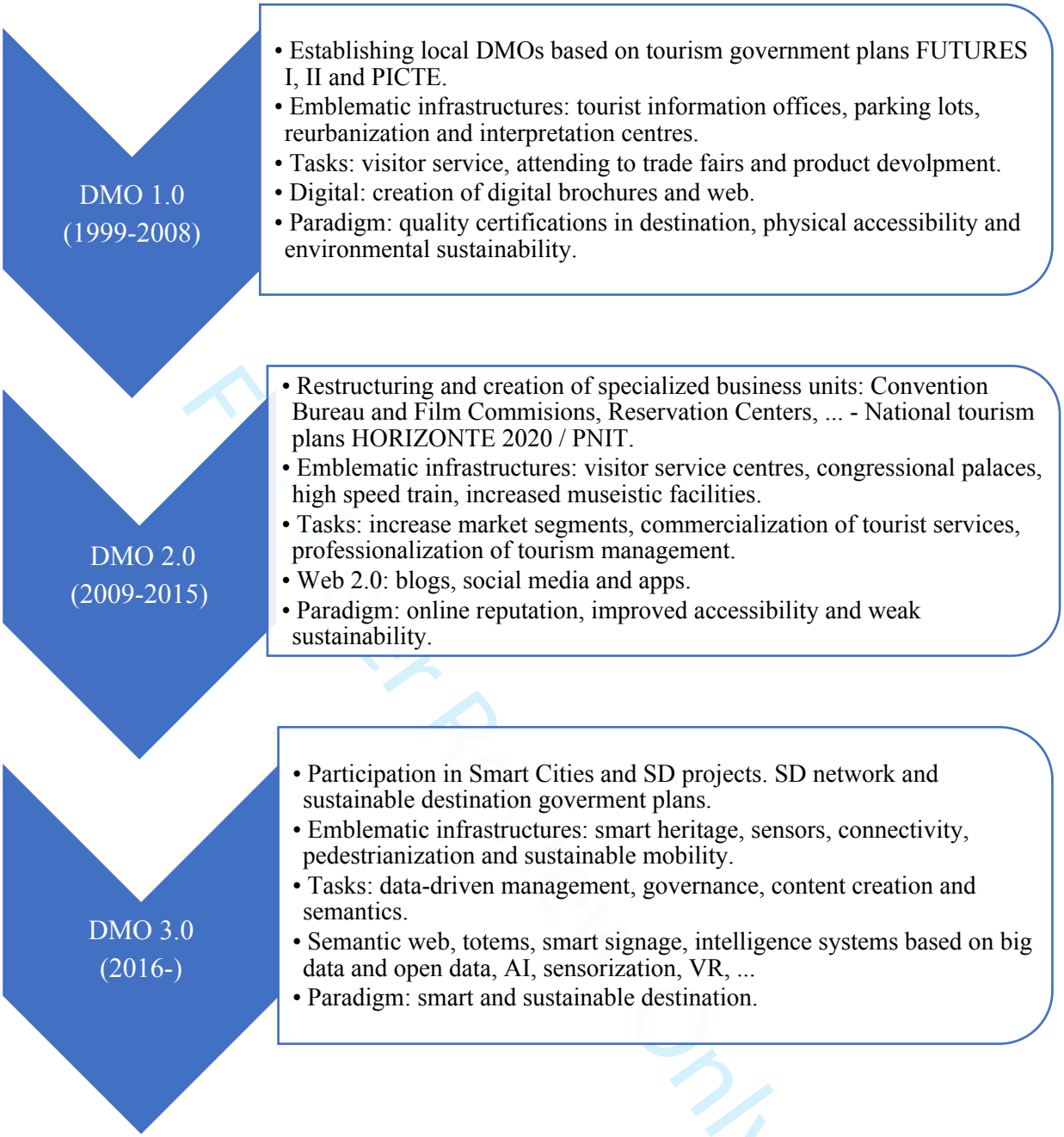


Figure 3. DMOs' evolution in Spanish World Heritage Cities

3. Methodology

To meet the objectives and research questions set out above, we chose a qualitative methodology. In the first phase, the documentation on SD or smart city projects related to tourism was reviewed. The literature review was carried out through a search in the SCOPUS database. We also sought information on SD projects on official pages and specialized media. In a second phase, individual semi-structured in-

depth interviews were conducted with the managers of the 15 Spanish World Heritage Cities Group. Additionally, we interviewed an executive of SEGITTUR. Through one of the technicians of the Group, the contact details of the managers were provided, and they were asked to participate in the research. Next, a letter of presentation of the study was sent to them by e-mail, and the interviews were scheduled. Interviews (n 16) were held between May and September 2021. The duration of the interviews was on average 68 minutes. It was decided to conduct the interviews by videoconference / phone to achieve the greatest participation. Finally, every city manager of the World Heritage Cities Group participated in the research. In only one case, the technician answered the questions by e-mail due to DMO policy.

We performed interviews from a proposed script to unify the criteria, but in all cases, it was decided to leave the interviewees enough flexibility to elaborate on their responses (Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019). The script brought together two types of questions. The first group of closed questions was presented in the form of a questionnaire, where we categorized the answers statistically, which allowed us an initial quantitative analysis. The second set of questions was formulated in such a way that the expert could give an open and content-rich answer. The two types of questions were interspersed to give a logical sequence to the interview and to gain the trust of the interviewee. The freedom granted by the semi-structured interview allowed for the reformulation of questions in order to explore in depth the items selected after the review of the state of the art. Another advantage of reformulating questions is to know the reality beyond the discourse initially expressed, recognizing that sometimes questions may mediate in some way the speech of the expert. Repeating certain topics throughout the interview can minimize the bias between expressed and actual opinions.

Interviews were recorded using a computer application for later transcription. This was carried out following the postulates of the grounded theory, that is, a combination of complete and partial transcriptions has been made (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). The latter were decided according to the objectives of the study and the theory that is being generated, in order to then perform the primary coding through ATLAS.ti 9.1 software. Once the information was reduced through the selection of citations and the assignment of codes, it was structured according to the objectives of the research. The analysis progressed through the following steps: familiarization, data reduction, pattern identification, re-construction and generalization, and development of theories (Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019).

To analyse data, an inductive and iterative thematic analysis was performed following procedures suggested by Femenia-Serra & Ivars-Baidal (2021), Miles and Huberman (2014), and Corbin and Strauss (2002): First, transcriptions were read and re-read. Second, the text was subject to open coding looking for preliminary, lower-level codes, giving time for deep reflection. In this process, memos and diagrams were consistently used to relate data and concepts, while codes were named according to their meaning. Finally, we opted for the representation of concept maps to visualize the relationships between codes, and to determine the frequency and relational density. The use of concept maps or semantic networks allows us to represent conceptual information graphically.

Interview guide

The script has been divided into three blocks of questions. In the first part of the questionnaire, we wanted to know what tourism technicians understand by the concept of the smart tourist destination. In the second block of questions, we inquired about how the destinations were working in the five axes of action of the SEGITTUR management

model. In a third block, as a conclusion, the interviewees were asked about the suitability of this management model in facing the crisis scenario generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the opportunities for DMOs that next-generation funds may entail. STDPs will involve the greatest investment ever made in Spain for the competitiveness of destinations. The calls for funding already published, in a manner consistent with SETUR's previous policy, take as a reference the SD model to assess the projects that are candidates for the plans.

4. Results

Results are organised in subsections according to the formulated objectives and research questions. First, we analyse the closed questions related to the status of adoption of the SD quantitatively. Second, we analyse open questions qualitatively. Participants' comments from the semi-structured interviews are codified by "Ij."

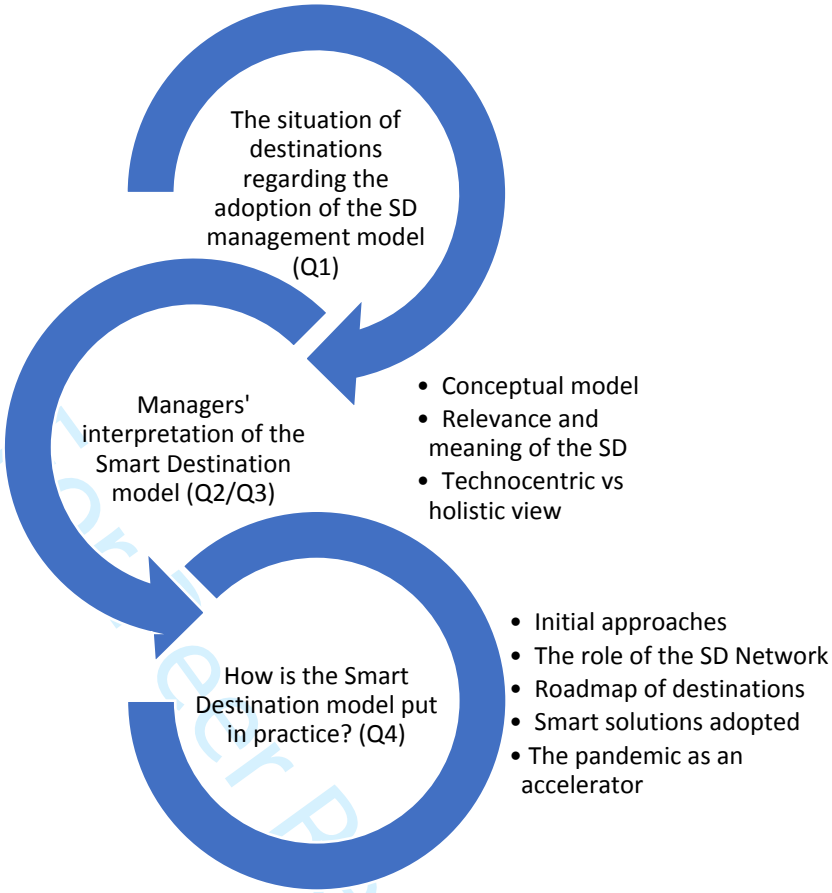


Figure 4. Results

4.1. The situation of destinations regarding the adoption of the SD management model

The answers of the first block of questions show, first and foremost, that the managers of the destinations interviewed feel the adoption of the SD model is part of an evolutionary change (60%) and not a disruptive one (33%). After almost a decade of the implementation of the SEGITTUR institutional project, the model is known to all technicians (1.1). The addition of all the Group cities to the SD network by the end of 2020 has made technicians participate in network trainings and meetings. Likewise, all destinations claimed to have developed previous projects related to the SD within initiatives concerning technologies and smart cities. However, only 40% of the destinations are working with the guidelines provided by the diagnosis of the

destination concerning the model.

At the political level, most cities show interest in the model, an aspect that is fundamental due to the transversality of many of the actions that involve the participation of different municipal areas and departments. Regarding governance, opinion is divided between those who think that management is already good and those that believe that a comprehensive work scheme such as the SD can contribute to its improvement. Most destinations do not have a consensual strategic planning document (60%). This tool involves the participation of different actors in the planning of the destination. Most destinations have included strategies related to smart destinations. As for the context that the COVID-19 pandemic has created, most cities think that the current moment is suitable for the implementation of the SD (73%), while almost half think that the government plans will help to implement it.

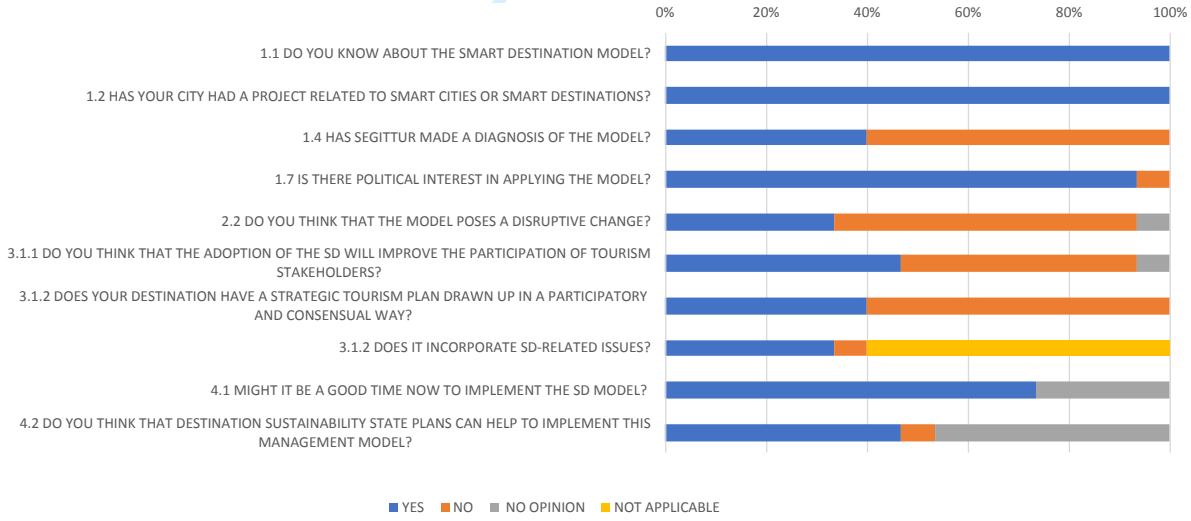


Figure 5. Situation of destinations

4.2. Technicians' interpretation of the SD concept

4.2.1 Theorical model

Concerning the questions posed in the successive blocks of the interview, in the "open response" model, it was initially a question of knowing how destination managers perceive this new management paradigm. Based on the definition given by each of the

interviewees, an attempt has been made to synthesize in a theoretical model the essential components of this way of managing tourism in heritage cities (see fig. 5).

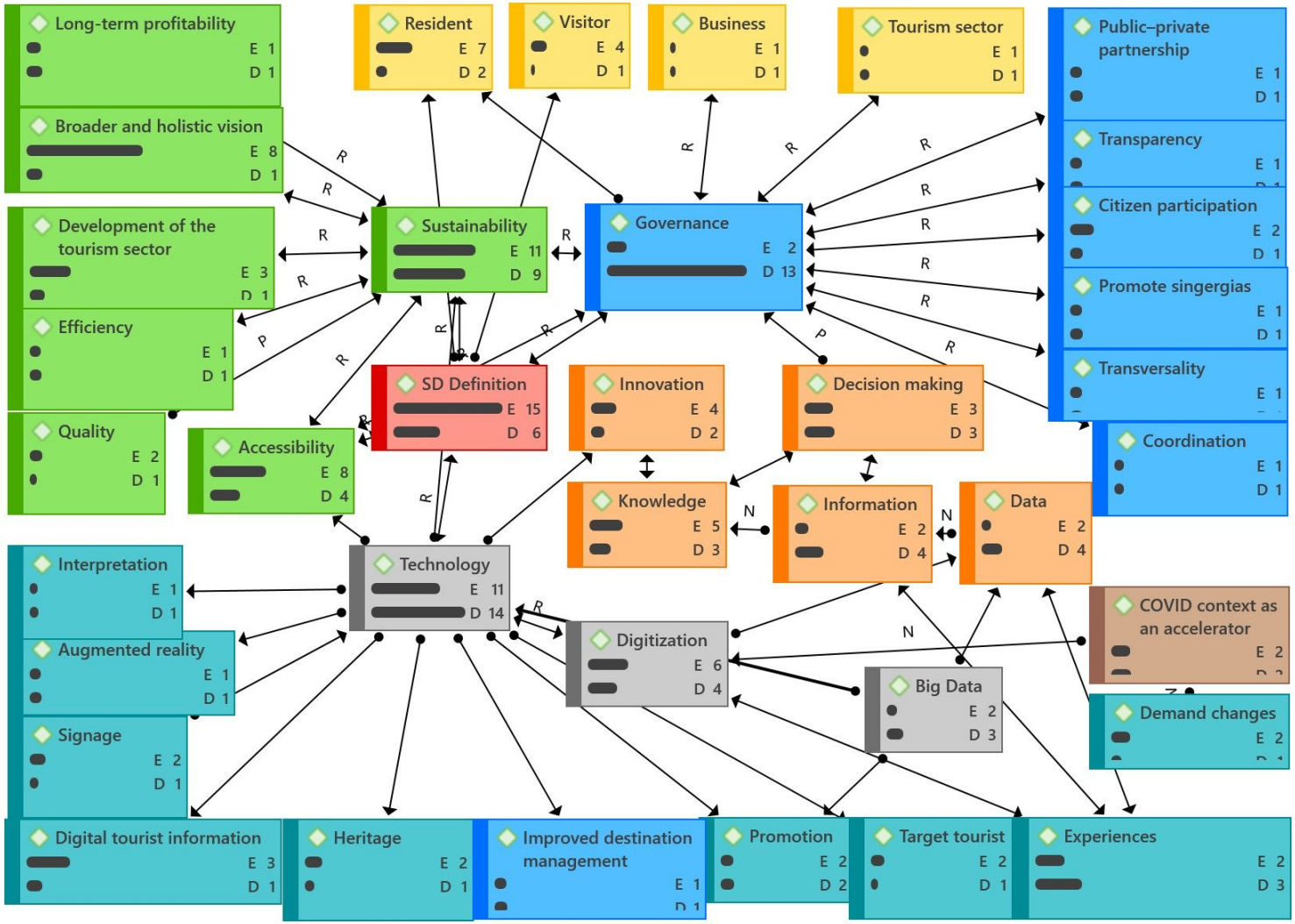
Based on the response, the smart destination is a multidimensional concept formed by the following interconnected factors:

- Technology as a facilitating instrument of the system
- Governance as a catalytic variable of the system (we are talking about synergies, coordination, collaboration, transversality(...)
- Sustainability as a variable of impact or result of the system
- Knowledge, information, and data as the input variable of the system.

This system requires a lot of structured data that creates information, which, contextualized and for a specific objective, becomes a knowledge source of innovations of different kinds. Technology has two aspects: on the one hand, it allows us to manage, organize, and contextualize data (information and knowledge) and, on the other hand, it allows us to improve the tourist experience with new products/services adapted to the different profiles of tourists.

Sustainability is linked to technology, while technology must provide data to optimize sustainability not only environmentally, but also economically and socially. Likewise, sustainability and governance are also linked, since good governance must contribute or be a reference for the adoption of sustainable policies. Advancement in accessibility allows all citizens to enjoy the city and is linked to governance and sustainability.

Taking into consideration the opinions of the experts, we interpreted the SD as a complex system of interactions, a complex reality that supposes a dense network of relationships between elements, difficult to imitate in the short term, which makes the smart destination a reality that is a source of value sustained over time.



E: frequency
D: density

N: is a cause of
P: is property of
R:is associated with

Figure 6. Conceptual map: SDs according to experts' definitions

4.2.2 Relevance and meaning of the term

Several managers highlighted the qualitative change that the model involves as "something very necessary" (I1). The change is seen as a "great challenge" to work on: "It has taken us a lot to adapt to the idea of SD because it is a big leap. It will be a substantial change for the city, and it will give importance to the citizen" (I1); another manager said: "All cities have a great challenge to work on the SD" (I10), similarly, the challenge was seen as: "We have to make a qualitative leap to the level proposed by SD" (I11); Lastly, this technician emphasised that "in the field of innovation and digitization we have to try because we are far behind" (I11).

Technology and sustainability are the concepts most related to SD. Accessibility is the third most often cited term associated with the concept. It is followed by a concern for a model that considers the resident and her quality of life, an aspect more cited than concern for visitor satisfaction (7 versus 4 mentions). Governance, although it is only mentioned twice, is implicit in ten associated terms: public-private collaboration, transparency, coordination, etc. The generation and transfer of knowledge are linked to the potential of technologies and big data to better understand the visitor and make informed decisions. Innovation has a more discreet weight, although when it is mentioned, it is quite prevalent: "A smart tourist destination has to be an innovative tourist destination that guarantees sustainable development..." (I9).

There is also parallelism with a destination management model based on economic competitiveness: "Create a profitable model in the long term, and not short-term as of now" (I12). In this economic sense, the efficiency in the model (I15) has also been highlighted, as well as the effectiveness when delivering the information to the visitor (I14) and the efficiency of the marketing processes (I2).

4.2.3 Technocentric vs holistic vision of the model

A technocentric vision of the SD prevails in the opinion of six of the managers interviewed. SDs are also associated with the solutionist idea of technology, which will allow for the attraction of the profile of the target tourist: "the cultural tourist with a high cultural level, interested in heritage, who seeks to live experiences and authenticity" (I12). In this sense, the SD is associated with market intelligence applied to destination promotion: “Know what customers are looking for, know the satisfaction index, what offer they need (…) With this, try to attract the visitors that are interested in each destination, starting from knowledge to undertake a promotional task” (I5). They even go as far as to say that “90% of SD is technology” (I7) or define SD in the following sentence: “for us [it] is a tool to improve the tourism management of the destination through innovative technologies (I13)”. In this same line, another technician understands the SD as: “having a series of technologies” (I5). In general, for these managers the SD is associated with data: “a system that allows decisions to be made from data” (I6); or “to create a large data [set] of all the cities of the group and make a better promotion of this knowledge” (I5). Or they focus on the implementation of technology in traditional tasks such as providing information to the visitor: “bringing tourism and heritage resources closer to the new tourist profile that requires more digital information” (I12); “to give maximum information with the maximum technology” (I2); “technologies focused on tourists are developed. Now digitalization is especially important” I3.

However, there are managers of eight destinations for whom technology clearly takes a back seat. They give more relevance to concepts such as sustainable development. For them, the SD means: “creating a new model of tourism development

(…) of sustainable tourism" (I12); "That it be a sustainable and accessible destination, (…) that visitors perceive the destination as a quality destination and the citizen also sees this improvement (I2); "SEGITTUR guidelines - sustainable, accessible, innovative and digitized" (I11). "Sustainable development is one of the axes that is gaining more importance "(I3). "Opportunity for tourism development and synergies through innovation, technology, digitization and the promotion of a model of tourism sustainability" (I7); "We have tried to make tourism in the city as sustainable as possible" (I4); "Work more on environmental, economic, and cultural sustainability. Create a profitable long-term model and not a short-term one like now. It means creating a new tourism development model that adapts to the change in trend that is being imposed" (I12).

This contrast between a limited vision and a broader one is very well defined by one of the managers interviewed: "I am against thinking that the smart destination is to have digital functionalities. When they focus on the role of participation, governance, or accessibility, they already give a broader and more holistic vision of the destination (…) It is important to reinforce the other pillars, not just the digital one" (I8). In another case, citizen participation in decisions and public-private collaboration were also highlighted as a priority. Yet another technician comes to propose as desirable "to provide a social environment of integration with the resident" (I14).

This idea of a holistic management model is very synthesized in the definition given by one of the managers: "one that incorporates modern technologies and innovation in work processes while serving the sustainability and accessibility objectives in a model of Governance, seeking efficiency, transparency, and participation and having as priorities, citizen participation in decisions and public-private agreement" (I15).

4.3. How is the concept operational at the destination level?

4.3.1. First approaches

Funding is the key to developing SD projects and strategies. Some destinations join these initiatives because there are sources of financing from different public administrations or levels of government. Many of the cities have carried out projects related to SDs under the following aid programs: 1) European projects (*Bodah, Smart Heritage City*, *Smartiago*); 2) Sustainable and Integrated Urban Development Strategies (EDUSI); 3) Calls for Smart Cities and SD on Red.es[1]

Some cities participate in these grants with supra-municipal projects. This was the case with Ibiza Island and Mérida, which were selected in the call for Smart Tourist Destinations on Red.es. In Mérida, the Badajoz Provincial Council is going to invest about €1.8 million in capital. In addition, this city developed the Smart Tourism Mérida 2021-2024 strategic plan. Toledo Smart City was selected in the 1st call for Smart Cities on Red.es with an access control solution and a route planner. The Smart Digital Segovia project was selected in the 2nd call. In this case, one component referred to creating the "21st-century tourist office", which is renovating the Segovia Tourism website portal. In this same call, "Cáceres Smart Heritage" was selected. The project is conceived to preserve, enhance, and make the rich heritage of Cáceres known, acquiring a greater knowledge of the behaviour of visitors, activating strategies to retain visitors, and structuring a management system and model that empowers the local business sector. Moreover, Cuenca has framed its SD initiatives as a vertical application of its smart city projects.

1 Red.es is a Spanish public entity attached to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation. It is responsible for the calls for Smart Cities and Territories framed in the National Plan for Smart Cities

Within the framework of these funded projects and initiatives, various actions have been carried out (fig. 5). All cities mentioned initiatives related to the technology axis, and only two destinations mentioned accessibility and innovation projects. The initiatives framed in Smart Cities projects (8), the sensors implemented in smart heritage projects or capacity management (5), the renovation of the destination's web portals (4), as well as mobile applications, massive data, and smart mobility (3) configure the main actions carried out to date. Not a single comment mentioned actions related to the areas of governance and sustainability, two of the key elements of the comprehensive management of the SD model.

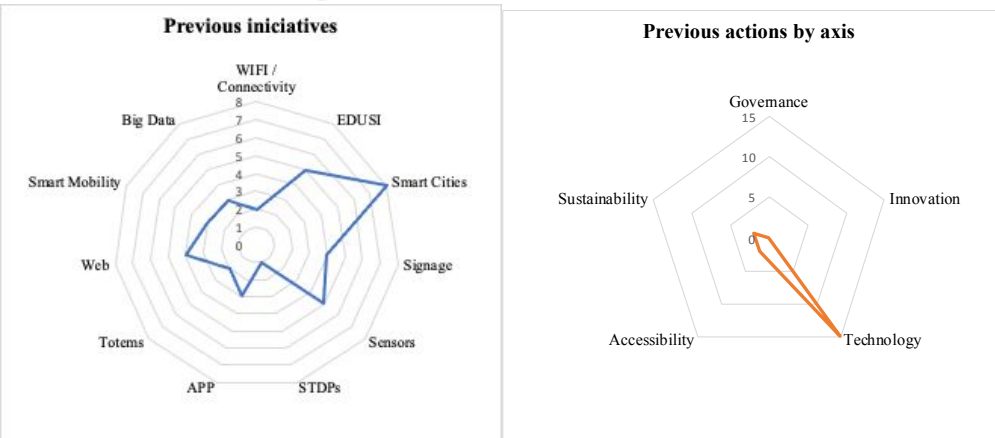


Figure 7. Previous actions and initiatives SD

4.3.2. The role of the SD Network

The Spanish government launched the Smart Destination Network (September 2018). The Network aims to "lead the development of the tourism sector through innovation and technology from sustainability". The Network constitutes a meeting point and support for destinations in their transformation process towards a smart management model and more sustainable tourism development. Currently, the Network has 347 members, of which 226 are destinations (https://www.destinosinteligentes.es). Some of the destinations had been incorporated individually before December 2020, at which time all the Group's cities entered as full members. These destinations participate in a

cultural heritage working group in the Network.

The interviewed managers evaluated the network in positive terms. One highlighted that "we were aware that we had to get on this train" (I11). The most remarkable aspect was the amount of information provided in this forum (I2, I3, I11, I12). Several technicians highlighted the large amount of information and the struggle to follow up on all the proposals: "I cannot read everything that is proposed" or "[I am] unable to follow so much information" (I11, I12). Regarding the usefulness of this tool to locate information, one commented: "you know where to look if you need something" (I2). Education and training are also suggested (I1, I12, I15), as well as learning from the most advanced destinations (I1, I3, I12, I13). Another benefit mentioned was the guide that the network entails by offering "strategic frameworks and good practice guidelines," as well as being "linked to an innovative network in management models that goes beyond the local sphere" (I8). The size and the diversity of members facilitate the establishment of contacts (I13). Finally, it is an appropriate channel to receive help and advice on standardization (I15), as well as access to a database of grants and financing (I15).

4.3.3. Roadmap of destinations to SD

Six destinations are more advanced in the implementation of SEGITTUR's SD methodology and have the situation diagnosis. In general, the scope of the projected initiatives is very diverse. Some destinations have highlighted the need to work together with the Group. This would mean incorporating the SD model into the framework of the Group's tourism area. In addition, some of the cities (Alcalá de Henares, Cuenca, Santiago de Compostela, and Salamanca) have already been slated for a destination government plan. Others responded on the basis of the projects presented or in writing

for these plans. One of these destinations conveyed its concern when drafting the specifications in a prominent component of the plan: “the smart platform is what worries me the most because I don't understand it very well [and don’t know] which one might be the best and if it is necessary to have it” (I7). In another case, he referred to the global tourism strategy: “our tourism strategy is aimed at being the basis for the economic revitalization of the [city], guaranteeing its long-term positive effects”.

Technology	(1) WIFI in public spaces (I1) (2) Intelligent Platform (I1, I8) (3) Smart signage (I1, I2, I8) (4) Active listening (I3) (5) Sensorization (I3) (6) Visitor counting and queue management (I3) (7) APP (I8) (8) Tourist Information Office of the XXI century (I8) (9) Big Data (I12) (10) Digital Communication Plan (I12)
Governance	(1) Strengthening DMO (I15) (2) Involving companies in STDP (I4) (3) A specific axis of the STDP (I11). (4) Co-governance (I11)
Innovation	(1) Above all the axis of modernization and innovation (I2) (2) Strategic and marketing plan (I2). (3) Working group among the different technicians involved (I4) (4) Training actions for the tourism sector (I11, I15) (5) Sustainable promotion (I15) (6) Creation of a new product (I4) (7) Create an observatory (I6) (8) Decision-making based on knowledge (I5)
Accessibility	(1) Accessibility axis in STDP (I11, I13)
Sustainability	(1) Sustainable mobility (I15, I11) (2) Decongestion of saturated areas and control of carrying capacity (I15) (3) Management and control of tourist flows (I3, I9, I13). Knowing how the tourist moves (I9, I12) or "diversifying the flows" (I10) (4) Certification as a Biosphere destination (I9). (5) Recreation of prehistoric caves (I4) (6) Sustainable urban development (I10) (7) Naturalization of the city (I11) (8) Conservation, and rehabilitation of heritage (I11, I12, I15) (9) Increasing the average stay (I13)

Table 1. Smart Destination Roadmap by axes. Individual implementation.

The search for financial support for the projects related to technology and sustainability is one of the destinations' priorities (I3). Many destinations entrust the development of SD strategies to the availability of funds from other higher administrations. STDPs pose a scenario where destinations will have support to execute SD strategies. “The sustainability plan can be something very good for the city” (I9). “You will see a before and after the STDP” (I1).

4.3.4. *Smart solutions adopted*

Smart destinations should be specified in concrete, available and valuable solutions oriented to the public (Femenia-Serra & Ivars-Baidal, 2021). These authors establish two categories according to their purpose: solutions for the management and marketing of the destination, and improvement of the visitor experience. During the interviews, questions were asked about the technological solutions launched or soon to be incorporated. The results are shown following the ranking of these authors in Figure 8.

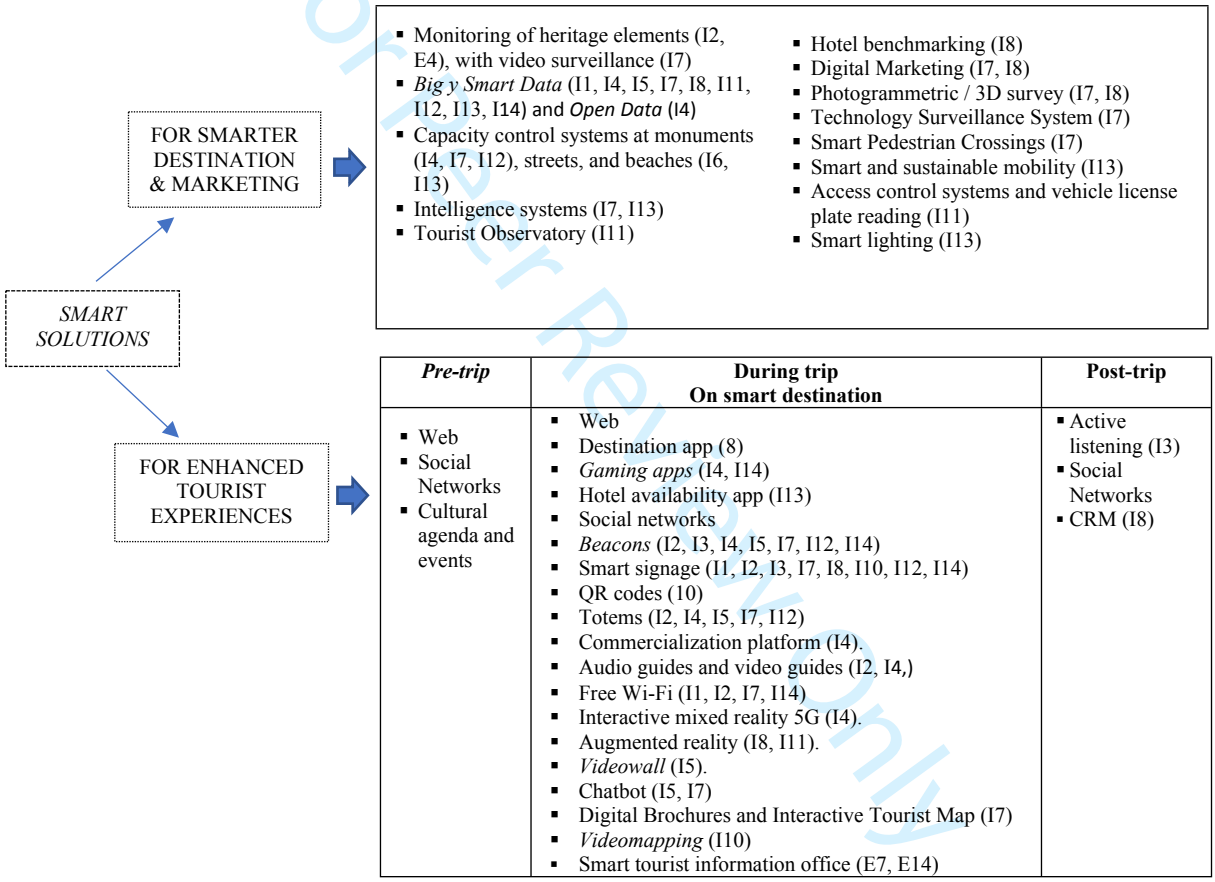


Figure 8. Spanish World Heritage Cities smart solutions. Individual implementation based on Femenia-Serra et al. (2021).

4.3.5. *The pandemic as an accelerator*

The COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating the process of change, and the responses of those interviewed confirm this. Some managers have highlighted the acceleration of the pandemic: “The office was closed due to the pandemic from March to June, and when

we opened, we did so with a transformation to what SEGITTUR calls the tourist information office of the 21st century. We have practically eliminated all paper." (I8).

QR codes are one of the technological elements that have become popular in the tourism sector during the pandemic. Several destinations are prioritizing this tool in their tourist offices due to the recommendations of the public health authorities. "We always put the QR, since COVID downloads have grown exponentially. People don't want brochures; tourists want to use their mobile to get the information. The downloads were fired at us, (…) before we didn't know what we were using them for. Now people do not want paper (I10). Museums and monuments are also choosing to convert their traditional audio guides into apps or offering access certain to content through these codes. The months of confinement and limited mobility have also served to promote and recover virtual visit projects (I4).

The period of confinement has also influenced environmental awareness and a preference for free and natural spaces: "Sustainable development is one of the axes that is gaining more importance. COVID is driving a type of demand interested in environmental care and protected natural environments" (I3).

Another accelerating factor in the implementation of SD projects and strategies is the goverment plan, which also emerged as a response to the COVID crisis:

> "If we are beneficiaries of the STDP, there would be another acceleration. These plans are very supportive of environmental sustainability and innovation. We have the whole subject of intelligence and innovation incorporated into the sustainability plan. There is a lot of harmony between the sustainability plans and the SD objectives. The sustainability plan is going to be an opportunity to develop the diagnostic actions" (I8).

5. Discussion

This paper has aimed to discover how Spanish World Heritage Cities are interpreting and implementing smart destinations strategies. Due to the strong institutional impulse leadership by SEGITTUR and as a top-down policy, it seemed relevant to us to see the degree of development through the study of one of the most consolidated destination networks in Spain. Perceptions of local tourism managers about the smart destination model were collected and analysed.

5.1. Theoretical implications

At the academic level, authors such as Ivars et al. (2019), conceive smart destinations as a new scenario in destination management. However, the results show mixed opinions. Only a third of the managers interviewed consider it to be a disruptive model for destination management. As a fashionable term and with considerable political interest, the word runs the risk of "emptying the content," thus, the importance of defining its meaning. We can therefore speak of a technocentric vision of SDs versus a holistic vision proposed by the SEGITTUR model. Because although SEGITTUR's (2015) definition is the "perfect" idea of what a tourist destination should be, the difficulty is in making it a reality (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2019). Where is the innovative transversal vision that Troitiño (2007) claimed?

As Mandić & Kennell (2021) prove in UK heritage destinations, DMOs view technological innovations positively and are involved in lots of individual projects. In our study, we have detected almost forty technological initiatives ongoing or planned. We also confirm that the pandemic has magnified this already vital role of technologies (Utkarsh & Sigala, 2021), and has accelerated changes that were already underway. Technologically-driven innovations can help DMOs to optimise tourism development by addressing issues such as carrying capacity, stakeholder management, and

community involvement (Mandić & Kennell, 2021). However, the digital component can only support the transformation of a tourism destination toward smartness when the physical component of the inter-organizational network can function effectively (Baggio et al., 2020). Therefore, the challenge lies more in governance than in technology (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2019). Hence, it seems crucial to devote relevant attention to everything that needs to be planned and implemented (e.g., a profound revision of organizations, processes, and practices, a change in the organizational culture, etc.) to render this technology-driven business model real and effective (Baggio et al., 2020). They wonder how the technological infrastructure can ease cooperation, knowledge sharing, open innovation, and co-creation.

5.2. Practical implications

Given that the sustainable development of tourism is a major concern for DMOs in heritage tourism (Mandić & Kennell, 2021), DMOs should focus on addressing smart governance. This becomes even more relevant, given that the pandemic caused an unprecedented crisis in tourism, and this is "a unique opportunity to rethink tourism and build a new model based on sustainability" (Ortega et al., 2020, p. 161).

The size, structure, and model of the city condition the possibilities of evolving towards a destination and the ways in which the corresponding strategy is designed and developed (Ivars-Baidal & Femenia-Serra, 2020, p. 47). As a management reference model, the SD is built through the design and development of "smart" projects integrated into a global strategy. Due to the variety of SD development initiatives and their heterogeneous scope, it is necessary to refer to the scale of the project. Faced with the comprehensive approach, there is a risk of proposing projects based on ill-

considered technological investments that can generate new dependencies and that are difficult to maintain over time (Ivars-Baidal & Femenia-Serra, 2020).

The interviews additionally revealed that the Network can play a facilitative role in the transition to the SD model. Managers especially valued the Network as an information broker, education and training provider, inspiration on advanced practices, a source of networking possibilities, as well as the appropriate channel to receive help and advice on standardization, and access to a database of grants and financing. All of this makes this instrument a valuable enabler of DMOs' human resources.

It can also be stated that knowledge sharing determines the competitiveness of a destination and is a vital part of destination governance (Gajdošík, 2019). If data fuel the intelligence systems, knowledge is key in the activities of a DMO in smart destinations. Big data initiatives are planned in nine destinations, giving rise to some questions on how they are going to take advantage of these technologies and if they are going to implement actions that improve processes to obtain value from data through knowledge-based management. Adopting this approach, knowledge management and sharing will be the basis for four key activities of DMOs: a) strategic leadership, which implies public-private partnership, coordination and encouragement of networking between actors, and better decision making; b) Innovation; to compete in the long term a destination must be creative and innovative, including the adoption of an open innovation framework; c) Sustainability development, which requires monitoring performance to improve it and caring for local resources; d) Marketing and demarketing in a way that makes the destination much more competitive. SD as a Knowledge-based destination requires all involved stakeholders to actively engage in collaborative participation, knowledge sharing, and entrepreneurial culture (Racherla et al., 2008). In addition, a destination based in knowledge can aspire to be a wise destination as

postulated by Coca-Stefaniak (2020), namely, people-centred in their use of technology and resilience by contributing to the wellness of their residents and visitors and by adopting a wider regional ecosystem approach to sustainable development and innovation.

We seem to be facing a key moment in the development of destinations (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016) — perhaps the second most prominent in terms of the incorporation of functions to these management bodies. The first would be found between 1999 and 2004, with the creation of autonomous tourism organizations as a result of the impulse given through the Plans of Excellence and Tourist Dynamization (García Hernández, 2007; Troitiño Vinuesa, 2007). As a result of the Plans of Excellence, many of the Group's cities created tourism management structures. However, we have been able to verify that there are still marked differences between the Group's cities, as found by García Hernández (2007). Several technicians have highlighted the need to reinforce their teams to be able to tackle the work involved in being a SD. Destinations must go through the different phases proposed for DMOs.

6. Conclusions and limitations

We believe that this study contributes to an understanding of how urban destination managers are adapting themselves to the smart destination paradigm, especially in connection with the leading heritage destinations: World Heritage Cities. Despite its importance, the literature has seldom reported how these destinations are adopting the SD paradigm. The interviews with the managers from the fifteen SWHCs allowed us to have a better understanding of their interpretation of the concept. This aspect is fundamental yet poorly explored at the same time, as DMOs have a key role in promoting smart management (Sorokina et al., 2022). Although most interviewees

advocated a broad and holistic interpretation of smart management, the reality so far is that most of the projects carried out revolve around technology, as the literature has emphasized (Gretzel & Collier de Mendonça, 2019). A classification of the technology solutions adopted by SWHCs is presented.

Governance is a key term, with many relationships. DMO managers highlight the importance of balancing the needs of local communities and visitors. Therefore, DMOs that want to work in this direction will need to strengthen their leadership capacity and increase social capital. Despite public-private partnerships being essential to smart destination development, only in one case was it mentioned.

Smart destinations can be a comprehensive approach, however, our findings show the lack of a holistic perspective in executed and planned projects. We have learnt that technology is the center of actions, while it should be a tool serving other objectives. As Pan et al. (2021) stated, smart technologies in destinations could also cause several negative outcomes due to the power imbalance between different stakeholders of smart tourism development.

Regarding the limitations declared by the managers, the studied DMOs have notable differences in technical staff. The more dynamic destinations have specialized profiles essential for more advanced management. Those with less technical personnel see this point as one of the greatest difficulties in developing smart destination projects. In addition, the difficulty of incorporating talent with very specific skills is a matter of great importance for the success of smart projects. Another limitation refers to the tight budgets of the DMOs and city councils for tourism management. Regarding the projects financed by the central administration, several technicians highlighted the restrictions of the government plans for sustainability in destinations with regards to deadlines and specifications of particular solutions that are not always adequate for some destinations.

Lastly, several technicians also highlighted the difficulty of involving the local tourism sector to create what the academy has called "smart tourism ecosystems". At the moment, only one city has a destination web portal with a marketplace for local businesses, although at least a couple of destinations are working in this direction.

Each Spanish destination has a unique opportunity to renew its leadership, strengthen the DMO's capacity and thus be more competitive through new government plans. Those destinations that have the SEGITTUR diagnosis already carried out are in a more advantageous position to obtain funding and put into practice recommendations for advancing in the model. Also, those destinations whose DMOs have more consolidated management structures and more developed social network abilities will obtain greater success (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014).

As with all research, this study presents the limitations of transferability and generalizability. This study serves as an explorative case focusing on heritage destinations in Spain, meaning further research is needed to investigate the applicability of these findings to other types of tourism destinations and other countries. Furthermore, it would be interesting to carry out a longitudinal study that shows the improvement after the adoption of the SD model, as well as an analysis that uses quantitative techniques and includes the opinions of tourists and residents. A comparative analysis could also be carried out between different countries. This study is part of doctoral research. It will be expanded with a case study in which the main actors of the destination will be interviewed.

7. Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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