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Modeling Factors Affecting Smart Governance for Managing Cultural Heritage Tourism Destinations

Homa Sarvari Laleh¹, Hakimeh Niki Esfahlan*², Hossein Emari³

¹ Department of Management, Aj.C., Islamic Azad University, Ajabshir, Iran.
Homa.sarvarilaleh@iau.ac.ir

² Department of Management, Ara.C., Islamic Azad University, Jolfa, Iran.
Ha.niky@iau.ac.ir

³ Department of Management, Bon.C., Islamic Azad University, Bonab, Iran.
Hossein.emari@iau.ac.ir

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Abstract

Due to technological advances and existence of limitations in modern life, there has been a demand for new ways of tourism. In this regard, the present study aimed to model the factors affecting smart governance for managing cultural heritage tourism destinations. This study was of an interpretive, applied, quantitative, field-library and survey type. The statistical population was all activists, experts, managers and employees of tourism organizations in East Azerbaijan province and according to the results of the GPower software and using the criterion-based purposive method, 166 people were selected as a sample. The research tool was a researcher-made questionnaire that was obtained from the qualitative findings section of the study. In addition to the descriptive section, structural equation modeling was used to analyze the data and all analyses were performed in SPSS version 23 and SmartPLS version 3.1.1 software at a significance level of 0.05. The research results showed that the research model has a good fit and that the need for development, the need for accountability, smart features, culture, specialized factors and lifestyle has a positive and significant effect, and economic factors, political factors and government factors have a negative and significant effect on the smart governance of cultural tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan province. Managers and officials should think about developing and promoting positive and driving factors and eliminating negative and inhibiting economic, political and governmental problems.

*Corresponding author

E-mail: ha.niky@iau.ac.ir

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Introduction

Technological advancements, along with spatial, temporal, financial, environmental, and mass tourism limitations, have generated a growing demand for alternative forms of tourism. One such emerging alternative is virtual tourism, enabled through virtual reality (VR) technology. Many tourism scholars regard this innovation as a pioneering force in advancing the tourism industry, contributing to economic development and enhancing urban security (Novera et al., 2022). The implementation of smart city frameworks through information and communication technology (ICT) is believed to benefit both residents and tourists (Taghati Ahsan et al., 2023). In essence, smart technologies facilitate improved communication and interaction with citizens, ultimately leading to an enhanced quality of life (Bhuiyan et al., 2022).

Researchers suggest that the rapid advancement of technology in the global tourism sector has surpassed consumer expectations for tourism products and services. Therefore, to achieve success and maximize opportunities, it is imperative to adapt to these technological transformations. Enhancing competitiveness, modernizing tourism destinations, and optimizing the use of natural, cultural, and economic resources require innovative and creative mechanisms. Consequently, a symbiotic relationship between humans and technology is essential (O'Connor, 2023).

Governance can be conceptualized in multiple contexts, including corporate, international, national, local, good, and smart governance (Ruijter et al., 2023). As governance entails the decision-making process and the mechanisms for implementing decisions, its analysis focuses on both formal and informal actors and structures involved in these processes (D'Agati, 2018). Smart governance is designed to address the diverse needs of a society. Population growth and various socio-political crises have increasingly prompted leaders to embrace smartization across all societal dimensions (Hossin et al., 2023). As a developing nation with a growing population and economy, Iran must prioritize the establishment of smart infrastructure. In the contemporary digital age, governance is inextricably linked to developments in the digital realm, prompting governments to redefine the concept of sovereignty (Sohrabi et al., 2014).

Experts predict that in the coming years, tourism will emerge as the world's most profitable industry, earning the moniker of "invisible export" and serving as a key economic driver in many cities (Esmaeili Mahyari et al., 2021). Given the sector's growing importance within the modern economy, it is increasingly vital to invest in tourism infrastructure and improve the quality of services and amenities offered to tourists. Tourist satisfaction not only fosters return visits but also encourages positive word-of-mouth, thereby supporting the sustainability and economic prosperity of tourism destinations.

The city of Tabriz holds a prominent historical, political, and economic position. As the first capital of Iran during the Safavid era and the crown prince's seat during the Qajar dynasty, Tabriz has long played a critical role in shaping Iranian identity. Recent archaeological findings near the Blue Mosque date the city back approximately 4,500 years. Yaqut al-Hamawi referred to Tabriz in the 4th century AH as the most renowned city in Azerbaijan, and during the 5th to 3rd centuries BCE, it ranked among the most populous urban centers of the time. The city once boasted numerous gates and over 300 caravanserais.

Due to its strategic geographical position, Tabriz has frequently faced natural disasters, such as earthquakes, and invasions due to its proximity to Armenia and the Byzantine Empire. Despite its long history, many of the city's historical structures have been destroyed. Historically a key commercial hub linking East and West, the commercial spirit of Tabriz's inhabitants endures to this day. As such, Tabriz remains a vital center for tourism in Iran, with significant cultural, economic, social, and political importance. Accordingly, this study aims to model the factors influencing smart governance in managing cultural heritage tourism destinations.

Research Background

Smart Tourism

Smart tourism refers to an integrated ICT-based system that combines tourism resources with technologies such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and the Internet of Things (IoT), aiming to deliver real-time information and efficient services to tourists, especially through mobile innovation (Novera et al., 2022). It emphasizes a comprehensive, long-term, and sustainable approach to planning, developing, operating, and marketing tourism products. According to El Archi et al. (2023), smart tourism encompasses two main techniques: (1) smart demand and management strategies and (2) smart marketing.

Smart Tourism Destinations

Gretzel and Jamal (2020) define a smart tourism destination as one that is supported by state-of-the-art technological infrastructure, ensures sustainable development of tourism spaces, facilitates tourist engagement, and fosters a deeper connection between tourists and their surroundings. This, in turn, enhances the overall tourism experience while improving the quality of life for local communities. The concept of the "smart experience layer" highlights the use of technology to personalize experiences, enable contextual awareness, and provide real-time feedback (Hamid et al., 2021).

Smart Governance

Over the past two decades, governments and organizations have developed and implemented various forms of smart and electronic governance. Despite growing interest, there remains no universally accepted definition of smart governance or consensus on its components and dimensions. Given the high costs associated with implementing large-scale smart governance projects, many governments first opt to model and assess its feasibility to manage expenses effectively. Several models addressing evaluation, development, and service provision have emerged; however, a comprehensive framework remains elusive due to the relative novelty of the concept.

Smart governance aims to provide an integrated management platform that facilitates effective interaction among stakeholders through ICT infrastructure, intelligent processes, and data-driven decision-making (Nastjuk et al., 2022). Active participation from the private sector, government entities, and civil society is essential for achieving the goals of smart governance, including process integration, strengthened institutional relationships, and improved service delivery (Zhong et al., 2025).

Ivars-Baidal et al. (2024) found a disconnection between tourism governance and smart city initiatives in several cities, hindering the desired synergy in urban tourism governance. Anabastani and Barani Aliakbari (2024) identified smart governance, smart people, a smart economy, and smart education as the most critical indicators of smart rural tourism. Jankova et al. (2023) highlighted the application of ICT in managing, marketing, and organizing cultural tourism, identifying smart destinations, smart experiences, and smart commerce as core features.

Ghaffari et al. (2023) noted that while various studies have addressed specific dimensions of smart urban governance, none have examined all dimensions comprehensively. Through a systematic meta-synthesis, they identified four overarching categories—social, economic, cultural, and political—and ten core indicators, including service management, productivity, leadership, participation, and IT infrastructure.

Prayogo (2022) emphasized that smart governance significantly influences smart travel, tourism, and sustainability. Conversely, smart mobility did not demonstrate a positive effect on sustainability. Hosseini et al. (2022) listed key antecedents of smart governance, such as infrastructure, e-governance, legal frameworks, and agility, with outcomes including efficiency, sustainable development, transparency, justice, and citizen empowerment.

Bidkhour et al. (2022) assessed the smart tourism status of Mashhad and found it lacking. Their findings showed that digitalization, accessibility, cultural creativity, and sustainability significantly affect tourism development. Mandić and Kennell (2021) found that traditional destination management organizations did not perceive smart governance as particularly beneficial due to their current effectiveness in key areas.

Prameka et al. (2021) proposed three approaches to sustainable tourism village development: (1) public investment via community participation, (2) institutional and human resource development, and (3) ICT implementation to enhance transparency and service quality. These approaches promote leadership, innovation, collaboration, and good governance.

Molaei et al. (2021) concluded that while satisfaction with tourism activities was relatively high, awareness of smart tourism was low. The research suggested that smart tourism in its current state in Iran is in the mid-life cycle stage, moving toward stabilization and maturity—especially post-COVID-19.

In summary, while substantial research has been conducted on smart tourism and governance, little attention has been given to modeling the factors influencing smart governance for cultural heritage tourism destinations. This study addresses this gap by examining the impact of such factors in East Azerbaijan Province, thereby providing practical insights for tourism managers and policymakers.

Research Method

This study adopts a quantitative approach within an interpretive paradigm. It is applied in purpose, utilizes quantitative data, and employs a field-library method for data collection with a survey-based strategy. The statistical population includes tourism professionals, experts, managers, and staff in East Azerbaijan Province. The sample size was determined using G*Power software, incorporating an error rate of 0.05, a confidence level of 0.95, a medium effect size (0.15), and nine variables, resulting in a sample of 166 participants. Participants were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling.

Research Instrument

The data collection instrument employed in this study was a researcher-designed questionnaire comprising 10 components and 60 items. All items were rated using a five-point Likert scale, and no reverse-scored items were included. To ensure face and content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed and evaluated by 10 academic experts and professors specializing in marketing and tourism management.

For assessing construct validity, both convergent validity (using the Average Variance Extracted, AVE) and discriminant validity (using the Fornell-Larcker criterion) were examined. In addition, the reliability of the instrument was evaluated through composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, and factor loadings for all items, utilizing SmartPLS software.

Data analysis was conducted in two main sections:

Descriptive statistics were used to organize and summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants. Inferential statistics were applied using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the research hypotheses and analyze the relationships between variables. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 23 and SmartPLS version 3.1.1, with a significance level set at 0.05.

Research Findings

This section presents the findings of the study. First, the demographic characteristics of the participants are described, with the results summarized in Table 1.

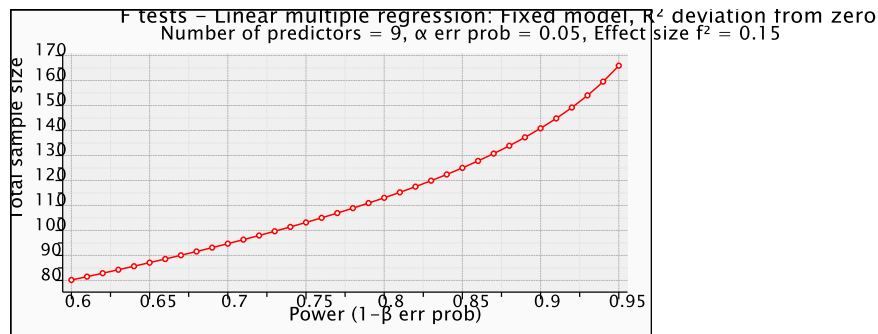


Figure 1. Results of sample size determination using GPower software

Table 1. Descriptive information of the demographic characteristics of the participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage Frequency
Gender	Female	61	36.7
	Male	105	63.3
Expertise	Tourism activist	38	22.9
	University faculty	15	9.1
	Director of the Tourism Organization	43	25.9
	Employees of the Tourism Organization	70	42.1
Degree	Bachelor	46	27.7
	Master	94	56.6
	PhD	26	15.7
Job experience (years)	5 or less	25	15.1
	6 to 10	55	33.1
	11 to 15	49	29.5
	More than 15	37	22.3

In the present study, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the data. For this purpose, first, the fit indices of the first-order reflective and second-order formative measurement models were

used to examine the fit of the research model. To examine the fit of the first-order reflective measurement models, composite reliability indices, Cronbach's alpha, factor loadings, convergent validity (AVE) and the Fornell-Larker index (divergent validity) were used and to examine the second-order formative fit, the variance increment index (VIF) was used. Figure 2 shows the results of the initial examination of the factor loadings of all questions.

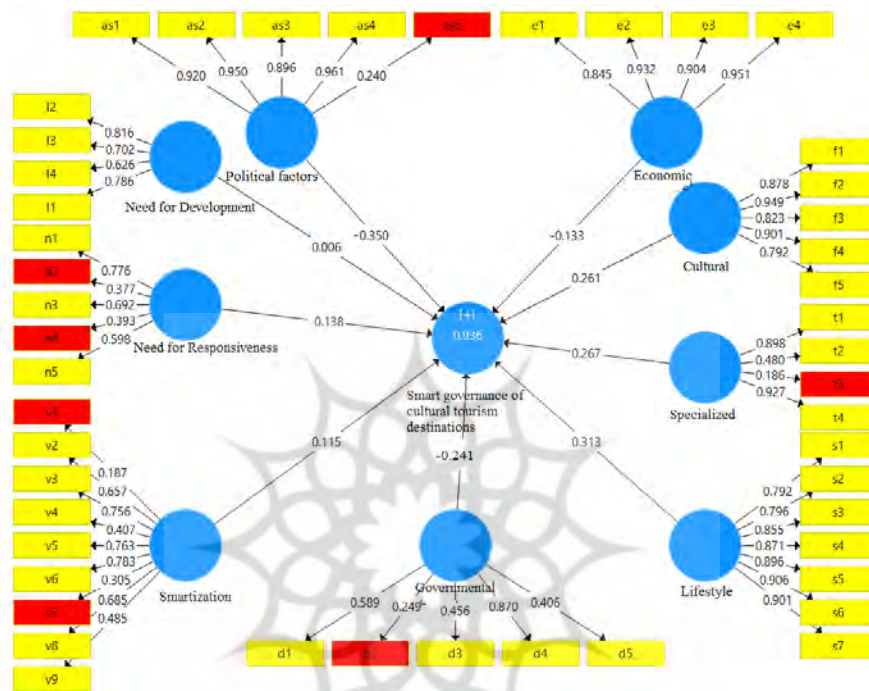


Figure 2. Model with factor loading coefficients

Based on figure 2, the initial examination of the factor loading coefficients of each of the questionnaire questions showed that the factor loadings of a number of questions were less than 0.4, which are shown in red in Figure 2. Therefore, at this stage, the aforementioned questions were removed from the model and the model was re-run. The results of Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, convergent validity (AVE), and variance increment index (VIF) are given in Table 2.

Based on the results of Table 2, all variables obtained Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values higher than 0.7, AVE index higher than 0.5 and VIF index lower than 5, therefore the instrument used in this study has reliability, convergent validity and variance increase rate and the research model also has a good fit. The results of the Fornell-Larker matrix to examine the divergent validity of the research instrument are given in Table 3.

Table 2. Results of Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, convergent validity, and variance increment index

Variables	AVE	VIF	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Need for Development	0.613	1.064	0.893	0.824
Need for Responsiveness	0.622	1.247	0.847	0.784
Smartization Features	0.674	1.366	0.855	0.796
Smart Governance of Cultural Tourism Destinations	0.638	1.841	0.941	0.885
Culture	0.655	1.557	0.853	0.809
Specialized Factors	0.628	1.149	0.911	0.863
Lifestyle	0.637	1.857	0.857	0.811
Economic Factors	0.664	1.669	0.931	0.871
Political factors	0.614	1.841	0.896	0.856

Table 3. Results of the Fornell and Larker matrix

Variables	Need for development	Need for responsiveness	Smartization features	Smart governance	Culture	Specialized factors	Lifestyle	Economic factors	Political factors	Government factors
Need for development	0.932									
Need for responsiveness	0.755	0.879								
Smartization features	0.714	0.658	0.916							
Smart governance	0.534	0.661	0.633	0.886						
Culture	0.655	0.569	0.591	0.689	0.839					
Specialized factors	0.591	0.547	0.578	0.617	0.539	0.861				
Lifestyle	0.531	0.539	0.562	0.547	0.547	0.541	0.641	0.899		
Economic factors	0.569	0.549	0.539	0.622	0.551	0.538	0.539	0.798		
Political factors	0.569	0.613	0.549	0.539	0.622	0.551	0.538	0.539	0.807	
Government factors	0.633	0.527	0.638	0.576	0.447	0.469	0.514	0.469	0.671	0.786

Based on the results of Table 3, the AVE root mean square of all first-order variables is greater than the correlation value between them, which indicates the divergent validity of the research instrument and the appropriate fit of the research model. In the continuation of this section, three indices have been used to assess the fit of the structural model: 1) R-square and Q^2 , 2) effect size (F^2), and 3) goodness of fit (GoF). Table 4 presenting the R-square and Q^2 indices for the structural model's fit.

Table 4. R-square and Q^2 index

Variable	smart governance
R-square	0.889
Q^2	0.552

Chin (1998) proposed three threshold values of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 for weak, moderate, and strong R-squares, respectively. Henseler et al. (2009) also suggested three threshold values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 for the predictive power (Q^2) of the model concerning endogenous constructs. As shown in the table above, the R-squares index for the smart governance construct exceeds the strong threshold of 0.67, indicating a good fit for the structural model. Additionally, the model's strong predictive power for this construct is confirmed. Cohen (2013) defined three thresholds 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 for small, medium and large effect sizes of one construct on another, respectively. According to Wetzels et al. (2009), values of 0.01, 0.25 and 0.36 are defined as thresholds for weak, moderate and strong goodness of fit (GoF), respectively. A GoF value of 0.789 indicates a high level of overall model fit.

The models with path coefficient values and t-value significance are shown in Figure 3 and p-value in Figure 4. Also, the path coefficient values, t-statistics, and significance associated with all paths of the present research model are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Path coefficient values, t-statistics and significance associated with factor analysis paths

Relationship		Path Coefficient	T-Statistic	Significance	Result
Necessity of development	Smart governance of cultural tourism destinations	0.146	1.937	0.009	Approved
Need for accountability		0.108	2.745	0.006	Approved
Characteristics of smartization		0.189	2.731	0.004	Approved
Culture		0.287	3.664	0.001	Approved
Specialized factors		0.342	6.588	0.001	Approved
Lifestyle		0.319	2.837	0.005	Approved
Economic factors		-0.289	3.822	0.001	Approved
Political factors		-0.216	1.917	0.006	Approved
Government factors		-0.241	2.812	0.007	Approved

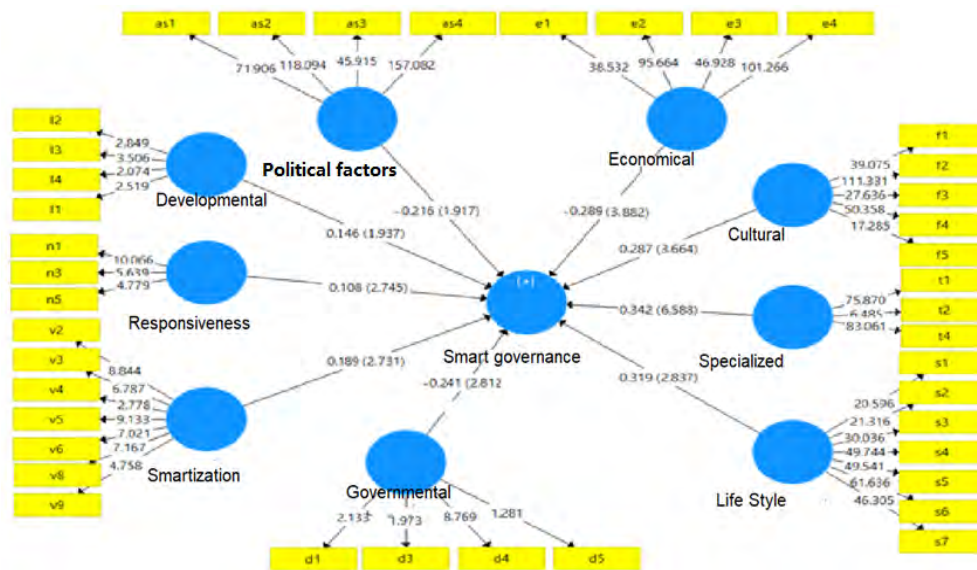


Figure 3. Model with path coefficient values and t-value significance

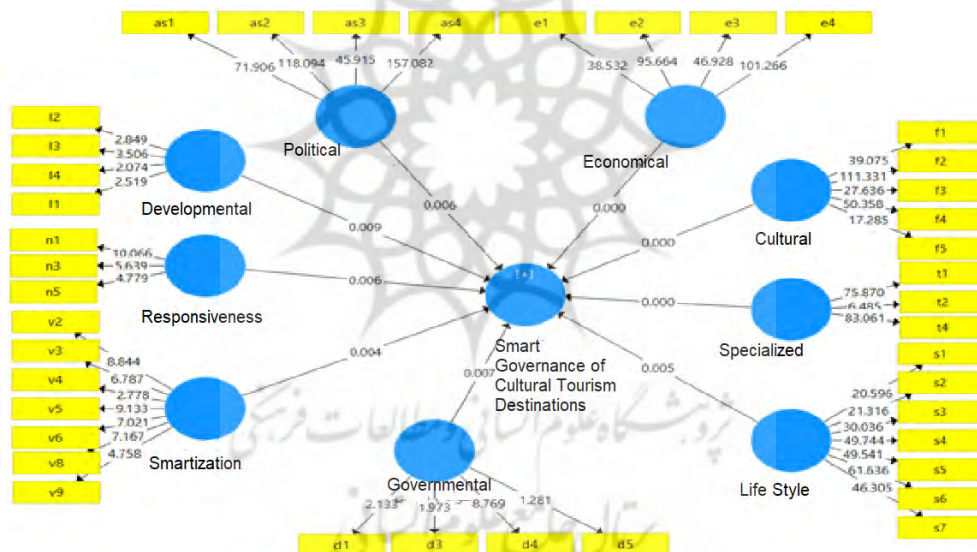


Figure 4. Model with p-value significance

As shown in Table 3 and Figures 4 and 5, the need for development ($p=0.009$; $t=1.937$), the need for accountability ($p=0.006$; $t=2.745$), characteristics of smartization ($p=0.004$; $t=2.731$), culture ($p=0.001$; $t=3.664$), specialized factors ($p=0.001$; $t=6.588$), and lifestyle ($p=0.005$; $t=2.837$) have a positive and significant effect and economic factors ($p=0.001$; $t=3.882$), political factors ($p=0.006$; $t=1.917$) and government factors ($p=0.007$; $t=2.812$) have a negative and significant effect on the smart governance of cultural tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan Province.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of modeling the factors affecting smart governance for the management of tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan Province. The results of the study showed that the components of the need for development, the need for accountability, smartization features, culture, specialized factors, and lifestyle have a positive and significant effect on the smart governance of cultural tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan Province. In explaining this part of the research results, it can be stated that without smart governance, the survival of any industry such as the cultural tourism industry is not guaranteed, and given the large number of audiences and the high diversity of destinations, this necessity in smart governance for the management of tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan Province becomes more and more clear. On the other hand, easy access to information on cultural tourism destinations and the selection of the desired destination, high financial and payment security in smart cultural tourism, the cost-effectiveness of benefiting from cultural tourism for tourists in smart tourism, and the ease of examining the health of tourism enterprises in smart cultural tourism are other factors that play a positive and effective role in the smart governance of the management of tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan Province. In terms of the existing platforms in East Azerbaijan Province, the level of acceptance of technology and intelligence by cultural tourists, the level of availability of technologies required for smart governance of cultural tourism destinations, the presence of specialized managers in the field of smart governance of cultural tourism destinations, the level of interest of the community in tourism, the level of community's willingness to choose cultural tourism destinations in a smart way, and the level of community's willingness to choose cultural tourism destinations among other destinations all have a positive impact on smart governance for managing tourist destinations in East Azerbaijan Province.

This part of the research results is consistent with some of the research results of Ivars-Baidal et al. (2024), Jankova et al. (2023), Ghaffari et al. (2023), Bidkhouri et al. (2022), Mandić & Kennell (2021) and Molaei et al. (2021). In their research, Ivars-Baidal et al. (2024) showed that limited progress has been made towards the expected synergy of smart urban governance with real tourism and that further actions are needed. Jankova et al. (2023) showed in their research that the characteristics of cultural tourism reflect the use of information and communication technology in destination management, marketing, planning, organizing processes, and changes in organizational culture. Ghaffari et al. (2023) considered cultural factors to be one of the factors affecting the design of a smart urban governance model. Mandić & Kennell (2021) showed that the level of public sector support for tourism and the increasing influence of non-tourism stakeholders in destination management had a significant impact on the perception of the destination management organization of smart tourism governance. Bidkhouri et al. (2022) showed that the current situation of Mashhad city is not desirable from the

perspective of smart tourism, and Molaei et al. (2021) also considered the need for smart tourism in society to be very high.

The results of the study also showed that economic factors, political factors and government factors have a negative and significant impact on the smart governance of cultural tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan province. In fact, this part of the research results shows that the smart governance of cultural tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan province is negatively affected by three economic, political and government factors. Regarding the negative impact of economic factors, it can be stated that there is high economic inflation in the society and the possibility of long-term planning is very low due to the lack of financial stability and the low purchasing power of the people has also caused tourism activities to not be a priority for a large part of the people in the society. Political factors also play a deterrent role in the development of smart governance of cultural tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan province through various means, such as the unnecessary and unnecessary interference of politicians in cultural affairs, the negative view of political and government officials of the country towards smartization, the existence of oppressive international political-economic sanctions and their role in cultural tourism affairs, and the lack of appropriate political relations with developed countries in the field of smart governance and the inability to emulate them in the field of cultural tourism. Finally, government factors, such as the low availability of smart equipment by the government and the ruling government in society, the low level of government support for the cultural tourism industry, and the level of government support for establishing smart governance in cultural tourism, have caused the process of developing smart governance of cultural tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan province to not proceed as it should. This part of the research results is in line with part of the results of the research by Anabastani and Barani Aliakbari (2024) and Ghaffari et al. (2023). Anabastani and Barani Aliakbari (2024) showed in their research that the concept of smart rural tourism is the result of a set of indicators of smart economy, smart governance, smart infrastructure, smart people, smart connectivity and smart education, and Ghaffari et al. (2023) also showed that the factors affecting the design of a smart urban governance model include social, economic, cultural and political factors.

Finally, based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that the smart governance of cultural tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan Province is affected by various factors, some of which, including the need for development, the need for accountability, smart features, culture, specialized factors, and lifestyle, have a positive and driving effect, while others, including economic factors, political factors, and government factors, have a negative and deterrent effect on the smart governance of cultural tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan Province. Therefore, managers and officials should think about developing and promoting effective driving factors and eliminating economic, political, and government deterrent problems. In this regard, the following recommendations are presented:

Based on the study's results, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance smart governance for cultural tourism destinations in East Azerbaijan Province:

- **Financial Allocation:** Allocate appropriate budgets to develop smart governance infrastructure and support cultural tourism initiatives.
- **Facilities and Incentives:** Provide cultural tourism facilities and incentives for the public, such as tax breaks and low-interest loans for investors.
- **Media and Awareness:** Use national media to promote the adoption of smart technologies and tools in cultural tourism.
- **Destination Marketing:** Introduce cultural tourism destinations effectively by sharing motivating information with potential tourists.
- **Education and Training:** Educate tourists on the use of smart cultural tourism facilities and the benefits of smart governance.
- **Software Development:** Develop specialized software for cultural tourism and integrate it into government operations.
- **Smart Marketing:** Implement electronic marketing platforms and smart pricing strategies for cultural tourism destinations.
- **Expertise and Specialization:** Employ smart governance experts and focus on specialized training for cultural tourism management.
- **Hardware and Software Integration:** Address both technical and process-related aspects of smartization to optimize service delivery.
- **Platform Development:** Design robust platforms to connect stakeholders and audiences with cultural tourism resources.
- **Pilot Testing:** Test new smart governance designs on a small scale before full implementation.
- **Virtual Restrictions:** Balance virtual restrictions to ensure accessibility while safeguarding governance interests.

Conflict of Interest

This research is derived from a doctoral dissertation, and no conflicts of interest were identified.

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