

# Piloting A Digital Maturity Model for Smart Destinations

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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to present the pilot phase of a digital maturity model designed to support lesser-known tourism destinations to become smart destinations. The main objective is the analysis of the relevancy and usability of the maturity model in order to prepare its further application to a larger sample and various types of destinations. The specific research question for the pilot phase of the study is: Which is the smartness degree of three lesser-known Swiss tourism destinations? The model is designed to bring answers to how these destinations manage their digital transformation, what challenges and opportunities they encounter and what aspects of their operations they prioritize throughout this process. It allows the identification of best practices to adopt, opportunities to seize, barriers to overcome and risks to avoid all associated with the process of becoming a smart destination.

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## RESEARCH METHODS

The methodology used was directly derived from the 6C's digital maturity model developed in the conceptual phase of a project on smart destinations (Fumeaux, Fragnière, Fux, Grèzes, & Imboden, 2020). The model includes six categories of indicators: culture, connectivity, customer relationship, communication, commercialization and customer experience. Three Swiss destinations were analysed: Val d'Anniviers, Gruyères and Goms. They were purposively selected due to their lesser-known status compared to well-established Swiss tourism destinations. A mixed method approach was used to assess their current level of digital maturity. Data was collected first through a survey addressed to their destination management organizations (DMO). The results were used to conduct one focus group per destination composed of stakeholders involved in regional tourism development. Data collected during these focus groups was then organised in meaning units to allow a comparison between the destinations.

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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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The scope of the maturity model proved to be highly comprehensive, enabling a detailed analysis of factors influencing the smartness of a destination. However, the pilot phase also indicated that while providing rich insights, the model could benefit from a quantification of some of its indicators in order to more accurately measure the digital maturity of destinations. The data revealed the many challenges lesser-known destinations are facing in their transformation into smart destinations. One of them is to acquire the necessary expertise to not only select relevant suppliers of digital services but also to implement and operate these services once acquired. The lack of a clear digital strategy for tourism development, restricted financial resources as well as a generally limited awareness among tourism stakeholders of the potential benefits of digitalisation represent three other key challenges. Regarding data and digital platform management, two main issues were raised. First is the multiplicity of various data management systems used at a scale of one destination but not designed to work together, making the consolidation of data extremely difficult. Second are the legal restrictions concerning data protection that currently make the sharing of such data among different tourism stakeholders almost impossible. Moreover, the limited resources of lesser-known destinations strongly limit the hiring of the necessary know-how to support the digitalisation of their services. While not yet the case, the acquisition of such expertise would have to be done through a joined financial effort between for example a DMO and a hotel association. Finally, the human factor was identified as a key determinant in fostering or on the contrary blocking an innovation culture within the destination and its willingness to embrace the opportunities and overcome the challenges of becoming a smart destination.

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## IMPLICATIONS

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The piloting of the 6c's maturity model will lead to a further development of its indicators in terms of quantifiable scores. Such development will allow a more accurate assessment of destinations and of the actions and investments to prioritize in their transformation into smart destinations. Data and system management, digital literacy enabling a relevant choice of systems and suppliers, a willingness to join efforts and share resources appear as key issues both from a managerial and policy making perspective and as subjects for future research.

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## KEYWORDS

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Smart Tourism, Digitalization, Digital Maturity, Regional Development

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