



## Conceptualizing the Smart Tourism Mindset: Fostering Utopian Thinking in Smart Tourism Development

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### Abstract

The growing literature on smart tourism and the increasing number of smart tourism initiatives demonstrate that the idea of smart tourism is captivating and that its potential is great. However, its concrete implementation so far has lacked the transformative focus called for by smart development principles. This paper suggests that conceptualizing smart tourism development as a utopian endeavor that requires critiquing the status quo and collective imagining of better tourism and good destinations could help smart tourism efforts transcend their instrumental, short-term, and fragmented character. It further introduces the concept of the Smart Tourism Mindset to propose that, as a utopian enterprise, smart tourism needs to be guided by specific values and traits that permeate actors at all levels. The paper concludes by calling for a greater focus on identifying what these values and traits are and how to best establish and communicate the Smart Tourism Mindset.

### Keywords

utopia; mindset; smart tourism; smart development; smart tourism city; planning

### 1. Introduction

Smart tourism refers to initiatives and approaches, usually at the destination level, that aim at harnessing the unique capabilities of smart technologies to achieve specific development goals (Gretzel, 2021). These goals span from efficiency and competitiveness goals for businesses within the smart tourism ecosystem (Gretzel, Werthner, Koo, & Lamsfus, 2015) and for destinations overall (Bastidas-Manzano, Sánchez-Fernández, & Casado-Aranda, 2021; Jovicic, 2019), to broader environmental, economic, and social sustainability goals. Cavalheiro, Joia, and Cavalheiro (2020) depict the ultimate aim of smart tourism development as being public value creation. From a practical perspective, smart tourism goals have been conceptualized as encompassing the achievement of sustainability, accessibility, digitalization and creativity for destinations by the European Union (European Commission, n.d.), and have been described by the Spanish tourism agency SEGITTUR (Destino Turístico Inteligente, n.d.) as involving superior touristic experiences and increased quality of life at the destination attained through new models of governance, an emphasis on innovation, the implementation of a sophisticated technology infrastructure, a commitment to sustainability, and a focus on mobility and inclusivity. In many ways, smart tourism is seen as a panacea that can fix the many things that are currently wrong with tourism. As such, it is not surprising that smart tourism development has captured the minds of tourism researchers, practitioners and policymakers alike.

Specifically, smart tourism has gained significance in both tourism research and practice because, as a conceptual framework, it has the potential to stimulate re-imagining and re-calibrating every aspect of tourism. This involves re-thinking

tourist experiences (Femenia-Serra, Neuhofer, & Ivars-Baidal, 2019), tourist-business interactions, collaboration and innovation within sophisticated smart tourism ecosystems (Eichelberger, Peters, Pikkemaat, & Chan, 2020; Gretzel, Werthner et al., 2015), all the way to overall destination management (Femenia-Serra & Ivars-Baidal, 2021) and governance (Gretzel, 2018), as well as reframing conceptualizations of technology as a driver and facilitator of tourism (Gretzel et al., 2020). The idea of smart tourism is currently communicated in the form of a powerful narrative of progress that promises the achievement of sustainability, inclusivity, mobility and well-being for tourists and residents alike (Gelter, Lexhagen, & Fuchs, 2020; Gretzel & Collier de Mendonça, 2019; Gretzel & Koo, 2021). Smart tourism principles enable smart destinations, which build on smart digital infrastructure to offer the tourism industry transparent, innovative, creative and learning-focused partnership opportunities that translate into efforts to improve tourist and resident experiences while more efficiently, effectively and sustainably utilizing destination resources (Gelter et al., 2020). Under the umbrella of a smart destination, new forms of partnerships, innovative data collection and exchange, increased levels of coordination, and greater investments in virtual and physical infrastructure are possible (Gretzel, Sigala, Xiang, & Koo, 2015).

Smart tourism constitutes a paradigm shift in understanding the role of technology in tourism, in conceptualizing tourism data, in thinking about value (co-)creation among various tourism stakeholders, in appreciating the significance of destination governance, and in charting developmental paths forward for destinations. It also provides new opportunities for bridging the academic and industry divide as the achievement of

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smart tourism agendas is highly dependent on knowledge creation and exchange. As such, the smart tourism idea is a powerful motivator and catalyst for change.

Smart tourism recognizes that tourism needs to become “unstuck” and make a clear departure from old models of mass tourism that no longer serve the needs and desires of tourists and of the tourism workforce, do not reflect the complex and dynamic world in which tourism providers operate, exploit rather than empower destinations and their inhabitants, fail to address critical social issues (Coca-Stefaniak, 2020), and are unable to tackle the global challenges faced by humanity. Smart tourism promises a unique opportunity for renewal after crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a tangible approach to rethinking the way technology is conceptualized and implemented so that it can serve emerging tourism agendas (Gretzel et al., 2020). It also provides a concrete pathway towards sustainability (Ivars-Baidal, Vera-Rebollo, Perles-Ribes, Femenia-Serra, & Celdrán-Bernabeu, 2021; Perles-Ribes & Ivars-Baidal, 2018), including the avoidance of overtourism (García Hernández, Baidal, & Mendoza de Miguel, 2019), and offers guidelines for ethical and just destination governance (Gretzel & Jamal, 2020). In addition, it promises a way to render a destination more resilient by facilitating communication flows and resource mobilization, thus making it possible to better prepare for, address, or even avoid a crisis (Gretzel & Scarpino-Johns, 2018). In general, it strengthens the role of tourism-related institutions such as destination marketing organizations and highlights the importance of holistic approaches towards destination management (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica, & O’Leary, 2006).

From a research perspective, smart tourism constitutes a rich, inter-disciplinary field of inquiry that is growing tremendously (Bastidas-Manzano et al., 2021; Mehraliyev, Chan, Choi, Koseoglu, & Law, 2020; Ye, Ye, & Law, 2020), but misconceptualizations of smart tourism remain common in the scientific literature (Shafiee, Rajabzadeh Ghatari, Hasanzadeh, & Jahanyan, 2019), with technological applications remaining at the forefront of much of the research (e.g., Jeong & Shin, 2020; Shen, Sotiriadis, & Zhang, 2020; Um & Chung, 2021). In general, smart tourism research lags smart city research, which already has a strong governance focus (Yigitcanlar et al., 2018) and a more critical stance toward smart development theory and practice (Wiig, 2016; Yigitcanlar & Lee, 2014). Smart tourism research also largely fails to recognize the opportunity smart tourism provides as a tool to guide the envisioning of the future of tourism (Gretzel & Collier de Mendonça, 2019).

In general, while there is no shortage of ambitious goals, there is very little concrete guidance in terms of how to achieve smart tourism development. Smart tourism literature has painted a wonderful picture of the finished “building” of smart tourism and the stakeholders that will occupy it, in some instances describing the foundations and central pillars on which it rests (Gretzel, Ham, & Koo, 2018). However, a tangible and executable blueprint to achieving smart tourism development is currently missing. Too much emphasis is put on infrastructure and too little on envisioning what values smart tourism needs to incorporate and perpetuate. Also, rather than stopping at discussing inputs and outputs of smart tourism development, a more widespread focus on the drivers and the process of smart tourism development is needed (Gretzel, 2021).

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has made it obvious that tourism needs technological solutions to address its problems (Sigala, 2020). In addition, Brouder (2020) argues that institutional innovation can provide a clear pathway to transformation during and after the crisis, while Gretzel et al. (2020) also stress the need to question the way the tourism industry and research community think about technology and its implementation and use. It seems that smart tourism as a framework can offer much opportunity to guide these rethinking processes and chart a more resilient, just, and sustainable way forward. This paper therefore seeks to tackle questions related

to how a smart tourism development process can be initiated and what foundations it needs. To do so, it introduces the concepts of utopian thinking and mindsets and argues that both are necessary for envisioning and implementing a transformative smart tourism agenda.

## 2. Smart Tourism as Utopia

Smart tourism is in essence a utopian vision of the future of tourism. Utopia is usually defined as an ideal place, situation or state of being (Dictionary.com, n.d.) and has occupied the minds of philosophers, policy-makers and planners for centuries. Levitas (1990) describes it as a “desire for a different, better way of being” (p. 209). Utopias represent imagined systems in which resources are abundant and harmony and equity prevail. In this sense, utopias are also pathways to social improvement. Harvey (2019) explains that utopias represent shifts toward the greater good that are radical rather than reformist. Utopias are normative and are sometimes referred to as “pre-mature truths,” stressing a likely path towards their realization, although the term can also refer to something that is doomed to remain an idealist vision that is difficult to realize in practice.

Utopias are created through utopian thinking. Abensour (2008) refers to utopian thinking as a heuristic for debating how we live and might live differently. Utopianism uses the power of imagination to try to correct imbalances by applying holistic, profoundly different ways of looking at the world (Harvey, 2019). Thus, utopian thinking constitutes a critical tool for imagining what the future should hold. Friedmann (2000) defines utopian thinking as “an ongoing, time-binding discourse intended to inform our striving” (p. 471). Bina, Inch, and Pereira (2020) highlight the value of utopian thinking in educating desire for alternative futures, in expanding ways of thinking about the future, and in helping imagine and know possible futures. Amir Ganjavie (2014) emphasizes the important role of utopian thinking for planning and development by referring to early utopians as the first urban planners. In summary, utopian thinking is a versatile analytical process that helps envision alternative realities. As a collective endeavor, it offers a powerful way of creating momentum and realizing buy-in from diverse stakeholders (Valdez, Cook, & Potter, 2018). To conceptualize it as a collective process and discourse is important: utopias, when excluding and dismissing everything and everyone that does not fit their ideals, can quickly turn into dystopias (Isaac, 2015).

Amir Ganjavie (2014) notes that, in the context of city planning, utopian projects often form naturally when reality is no longer able to respond to urban problems. According to Friedmann (2000), utopian thinking has two components: 1) critiquing the status quo; and, 2) the constructive imagining of alternatives. Referring to the first dimension, Kozinets (2019) describes utopias as emerging in an “attempt to create significantly better societies by first challenging dominant social institutions, such as capitalism, socialism, contemporary politics, or communism” (p. 69). However, Kozinets also stresses that utopias, in practice, are not always radical and that utopian visions within existing consumer culture and capitalist ideology are possible, with so-called “me-topias” referring to consumers envisioning better consumption experiences and standards of living. Me-topias are individualistic visions of ideal personal situations that are neither reformist nor holistic. Along the same line, Christou and Farmaki (2019) discuss how eager tourists are to buy into utopian narratives and consume utopian experiences, probably as juxtapositions to their daily lives without having to seek out permanent alternatives.

Most of contemporary smart tourism thinking falls into the category of “me-topias,” with stakeholders seeking to better their situations within established ideologies and tourism frameworks. Accordingly, they lack the collective aspect required by utopias in the traditional sense. Interestingly, smart tourism ideas are also usually not envisioned by residents or consumers

themselves (which would constitute some sort of grassroots smart tourism movement), neither are they typically imagined, designed, and realized in collaboration with tourism businesses or destination management despite the participatory governance idea engrained in smart tourism development (Lalicic & Önder, 2018). Instead, smart tourism visions are typically designed and implemented in a top-down fashion, as illustrated by Gretzel and Collier de Mendonça (2019). Critiques of the status quo within smart tourism remain therefore limited and a collective imagining of alternatives is completely absent.

When a collective level is added, “me-topias” turn into “we-topias” (Kozinets, 2019). These “we-topias” are more likely to challenge the status quo. According to Kozinets, there are examples of “we-topias” through which consumers envision better futures based on alternative ideological and institutional models. The Burning Man festival in the United States represents such a “we-topia” in which consumers creatively play with the idea of a society freed from market exchanges and passive consumption. While “we-topias” lack the comprehensiveness of general utopias, they represent a critical step towards creating and implementing utopian visions. Social media play an increasingly important role in supporting the discourse around utopian visions of the future. Overall, utopias as visions of the future can be instrumental in shaping ideas that lead to positive change. Surprisingly, despite the extensive discussion of utopias in the general planning and specifically the urban planning literature, utopia as an analytical tool has not found widespread application in tourism planning theory and practice, and especially not in smart tourism literature.

Valdez et al. (2018) stress the importance of utopias and utopian thinking for mobilizing networks of actors in the context of smart development and for developing strong smart city narratives that empower and go beyond practical roadmaps. However, Gretzel and Collier de Mendonça (2019) find in their research on smart tourism brands that smart tourism and smart destination ideas are usually communicated top-down as limiting “techtopias” imposed on destinations, communities, and tourism businesses by large corporations with clear technological agendas. The prevalent smart tourism narratives, often amplified by national tourism organizations, describe smart destination brands as representing machine-like, well-functioning and efficient places that are filled with technology but void of people, play and pleasure. They conclude that these brands are valuable in communicating investment opportunities and making technology providers interested in smart tourism but that they fail to truly mobilize communities and tourism stakeholders to work together to create an alternative future that achieves betterment for all. Similarly, Grossi and Pianezzi (2017) describe most practical smart city projects as perpetuating rather than challenging neoliberal ideology and thus failing to provide concrete paths to better urban futures. Bina et al. (2020) acknowledge these critiques of smart development processes and suggest that utopian thinking can provide a way to explore and reshape smart city imaginaries.

It is argued here that, by not acknowledging that smart destinations and smart tourism cities are utopias, by not engaging with utopias as a theoretical framework, and by not exploring utopian thinking as a method, smart tourism as a research field and as a practice misses out on the opportunity to develop ways in which collective envisioning of the future becomes engrained in smart tourism efforts. Thus, this paper proposes to move away from smart tourism brands and top-down narratives and to abandon piecemeal “me-topia” approaches that do not have the reformist potential needed for smart tourism development. Instead, it calls for holistic utopian thinking that critiques the status quo and underlying ideologies, and that continuously engages in constructive and collective imagining. Smart tourism development needs holistic (e.g., convergence-minded (Gretzel & Koo, 2021)) and value-driven thinking to achieve tourism that is not only smart but also “good” (Friedmann, 2000). However, this necessitates the creation and

dissemination of a smart tourism mindset that allows stakeholders to envision, embrace and ultimately implement truly utopian smart tourism futures.

### 3. The Smart Tourism Mindset

A mindset can be described as a frame of mind, way of thinking, mental disposition, set of assumptions or notions, an outlook, or a conviction. It critically influences how one interprets and responds to encountered challenges. Dweck (2008) distinguishes between a fixed mindset focused on abilities and a growth mindset concentrated on learning and development. She ascertains that the latter leads to more success and resilience. When conceptualizing smart development as a long-term process guided by utopian thinking, it becomes clear that a focus on learning and development is needed. O’Keefe, Dweck, and Walton (2018) describe mindsets as critical to achievement and exploring one’s potential.

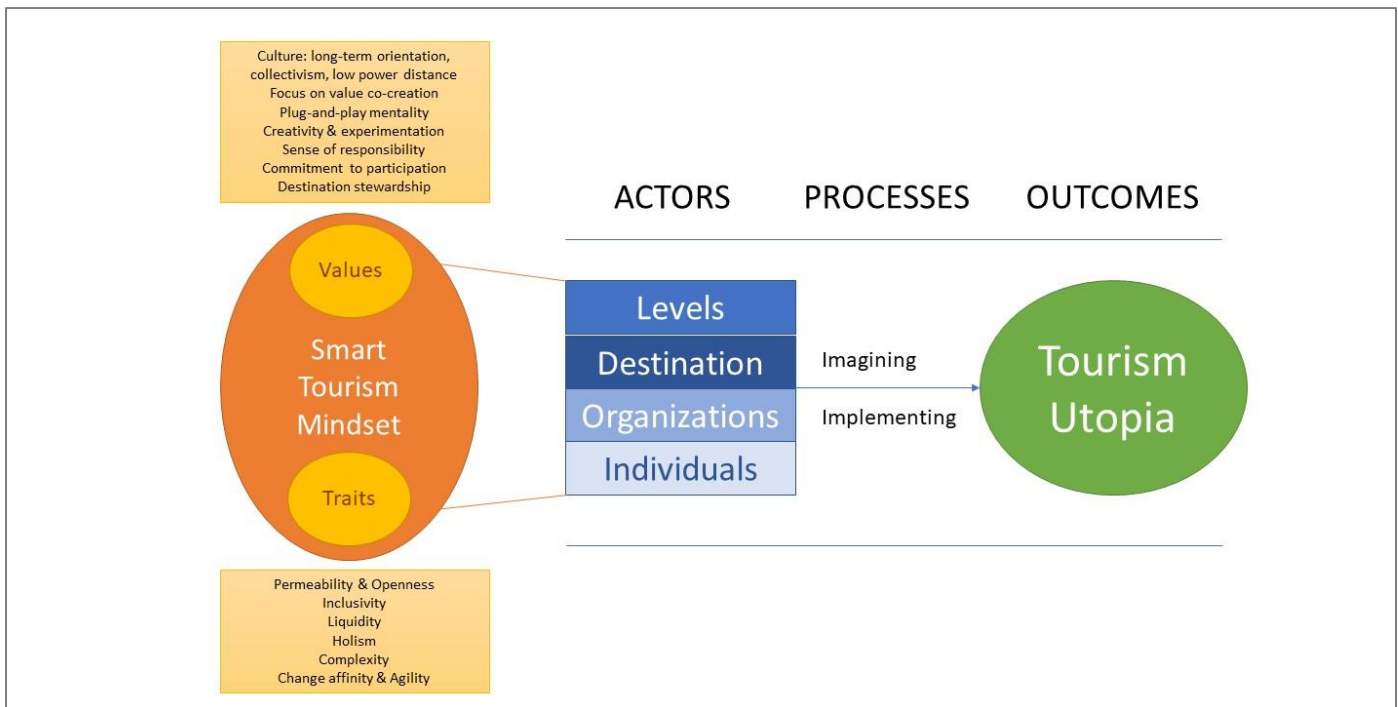
While mindsets have been mostly studied at the level of individuals and from a psychological perspective, mindset theory has also been explored in the context of leadership and sustainability (e.g., Gretzel, Davis, Bowser, Jiang, & Brown, 2014). A mindset motivates and guides. From an organizational or governance perspective, a mindset describes the general approach taken towards strategic decision-making. The Smart Tourism Mindset therefore refers to the way smart tourism is conceptualized and implemented at a destination, with a particular focus on the values that inform and shape these processes. It significantly departs from approaches that describe smart tourism by outcomes, such as the kind of soft and hard infrastructure needed (Boes, Buhalis, & Inversini, 2016), and evaluate its achievement using infrastructure and development indicators (Foronda-Robles, Galindo-Pérez-de-Azpillaga, & Fernández-Tabales, 2020; Huertas, Moreno, & My, 2019; Ivars-Baidal, Celdrán-Bernabeu et al., 2021; Ivars-Baidal, Vera-Rebollo et al., 2021) or measures related to competitiveness (Chung, Lee, Ham, & Koo, 2021). Such a departure from inputs and outcomes to values and process is also important from a communication perspective, as smart tourism narratives play an important role in influencing smart tourism discourse and steering the implementation of smart tourism in research and practice (Gelter et al., 2020).

The Smart Tourism Mindset needs to penetrate individual, organizational, and destination levels to instill smart tourism ideas and values, elicit commitment to the process, and inform investments and activities without direct management. The Smart Tourism Mindset is a critical component of smart governance in that it enables the emergence of a smart tourism ecosystem without needing to control individual actors and activities. It encapsulates understanding the principles of smart tourism development, exhibiting a willingness to participate in the envisioning of the smart tourism utopia, and demonstrating an openness to let smart tourism values infiltrate processes and experiences. Progress (meaning betterment) in smart tourism development critically depends on adopting a Smart Tourism Mindset as this frame of mind enables the kind of radical shifts utopias call for.

While there have been at least some efforts to think about the type of governance smart tourism needs (e.g., Ivars-Baidal, Celdrán-Bernabeu, Mazón, & Perles-Ivars, 2019), there is currently very little concern in the literature and in smart tourism practice regarding the values embedded in smart tourism agendas (Gretzel & Jamal, 2020) and the characteristics needed by actors in smart tourism eco-systems. The Smart Tourism Mindset seeks to make values more explicit and embed them into frames of thinking that permeate everything, from goal setting to governance to value (co-)creation activities. More conceptual thinking and empirical research is needed to determine what such a Smart Tourism Mindset needs to include. As an initial exploration of what this framework could look like,

this paper proposes two dimensions that seem to be instrumental in facilitating not only the constructive imagination of smart tourism but also the emergence and functioning of the kinds of smart tourism ecosystems envisioned in the literature (Gretzel, Werthner et al., 2015; Gretzel, Sigala et al., 2015). These

dimensions are summarized as relating to 1) a commitment to a culture that fosters smart tourism thinking (values); and, 2) appreciating and embracing characteristics that enable ways of structuring and organizing that allow for the radical shift smart tourism promises (traits) (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1.** Dimensions of the Smart Tourism Mindset

The first dimension of the Smart Tourism Mindset therefore refers to a smart culture to summarize values that should guide smart tourism envisioning and development. Borrowing from established notions of cultural dimensions, it is argued that long-term orientation, collectivism, and low power distance seem to be particularly suitable for driving smart tourism initiatives. Such values help achieve commonly mentioned smart tourism goals, such as accessibility for all, sustainability, participatory governance, just governance, and an emphasis on quality of life and wellbeing over short-term economic growth. As part of the culture, a value (co-)creation focus seems to be essential to building the kinds of smart tourism ecosystems that drive fluid exchanges and foster “plug-and-play” mentality (Gretzel, Werthner et al., 2015). In smart tourism, technology is employed in strategic ways to stimulate value (co-)creation for a multitude of actors who can change roles often and swiftly. What seems to be especially important in this context is a deep appreciation of creativity and widespread adoption of playfulness. This means that experimentation is not only possible but desired. Creative play allows for the kinds of explorations that lead to innovation and is therefore instrumental in not only realizing but also continuously generating utopian visions of the future smart destination. Finally, the Smart Tourism Mindset needs to promote a sense of responsibility that encourages the kind of participation encapsulated in smart development principles and fosters stewardship for the destination and its stakeholders. These values need to permeate all levels, actors, and processes of smart tourism.

Second, the Smart Tourism Mindset needs to instill an appreciation of alternative ways of organizing and structuring tourism. Smart tourism requires the adoption of notions of permeability or openness. This seems to be critical to understanding that smart tourism efforts are always embedded in larger systems and need resources from outside the traditional tourism realm. Gretzel and Koo (2021) illustrate through the concept of smart tourism cities that traditional

efforts of encapsulating tourism development simply do not work in relation to smart tourism. Permeability requires rethinking who the stakeholders of smart tourism development are, redefining goals to be more inclusive, and generally adopting more holistic notions of well-being. This relates to the notion of “master developer thinking” that Gretzel et al. (2006) identified as critical for destinations faced with rapid technological change. This dimension further includes receptiveness for ideas and a general appreciation for complexity, as noted by Gelter et al. (2020). Related to this structural dimension is the understanding that smart tourism also needs an appreciation of liquidity (Bauman, 2013) and thinking in terms of liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), organizations (Sharma, 2020) and liquid governance (Krisch, 2017). The realization of access-based consumption models is one way in which this frame of mind can shape concrete smart tourism initiatives and enable the kind of fluidity and evolution needed.

Finally, the Smart Tourism Mindset builds on an affinity for change that drives the building of capacity to change (Gretzel, 2000). This includes an orientation towards learning that mirrors the growth mindset proposed by Dweck (2008). Capacity to change seems to be especially needed considering the rapid technological changes smart tourism is exposed to. Rather than constantly trying to follow the latest trends, capacity to change in combination with the values promoted within the Smart Tourism Mindset provides the ability to anticipate as well as shape technological change in ways that benefit the smart destination. It also leads to much needed resilience when a crisis emerges (Gretzel & Scarpino-Johns, 2018). This kind of openness to change is related to the nowadays often talked-about agility concept but goes beyond the data-driven agility discussed by Stylos, Zwiegelhaar, and Buhalis (2021). It is informed by data and technology readiness but also innovation affinity and a long-term change orientation. It is focused on continuous improvement and cultivates as well as celebrates change.

#### 4. Conclusion

Most smart tourism research and practice has focused on making incremental changes by employing smart technologies to fix acute problems or create business opportunities, mostly without addressing how these steps contribute to achieving the long-term goals of smart development and realizing “the good destination,” a tourism-specific utopia where tourism contributes to well-being and justice for people and the planet. Efforts so far have been focused on the instrumental, the technological and the top-down narratives rather than the critiquing and the constructive, collective re-imagining of tourism called for by utopian thinking. This paper argues that a specific mindset is needed to realize smart tourism in a way that leads to long-term, system-level change and facilitates continuous evolution.

This Smart Tourism Mindset is mindful of the potential of new technologies but transcends technological agendas to pursue a utopian tourism future. It needs to be adopted, cultivated, and communicated by those who govern smart tourism at a destination but also needs to permeate the entire smart tourism ecosystem. Smart tourism development then becomes the creation, promotion, and implementation of the Smart Tourism Mindset. And, consequently, smartness should be seen as the extent to which a Smart Tourism Mindset has been adopted by the various players within the smart tourism ecosystem.

More efforts must be dedicated to conceptualizing what the Smart Tourism Mindset involves that can motivate, encourage, facilitate, and sustain the kind of openness, fluidity, commitment, holistic understanding, sense of responsibility and collaborative ethos needed to imagine and build a tourism utopia that continuously strives for betterment, not just technological progress. In this context, action research-focused, participatory methodologies, such as the smart tourism co-design process described by Liburd, Nielsen, and Heape (2017), are especially relevant. Empirical research on the differential drivers of positive and negative outcomes emerging from concrete smart tourism projects will also help in informing the Smart Tourism Mindset dimensions and their measurement.

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