OPTIMIZING DESTINATION MANAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF BIMs IN PROMOTING CULTURAL HERITAGE AND SUSTAINABILITY

DOI: 10.26341/issn.2241-4010-2025-12a-4-K02188

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Abstract
The objective of this work is to investigate the relationship between Business Information Models (BIMs) in tourism and cultural tourism sustainability, as a foundation for effective destination management. Within the tourism sector, there exists a wide variety of business models, each designed to address specific customer requirements. The competitive environment in which these models are developed, defines their objectives and operational methodologies based on the specific needs they aim to address. By aligning their goals to meet market demands and adjusting their operations accordingly, they ensure their relevance and efficacy within the tourism industry.

The analysis aims to categorize the most well-known and widely used BIMs in the field of tourism services and to collect tourist experience models for travellers to align them (matching) with data and expert activities. BIMs are also utilized to facilitate the creation of extended destination profiles, offering critical insights into cultural resources, tourist demand, and the carrying capacity of a destination. This leads to strategic planning that mitigates over-tourism and supports the sustainable utilization of cultural assets. The fact that these models aid in data-driven decision-making enables the development of policies that prioritize local community participation and integrate their needs into tourism strategies. Through their data analysis and management capabilities, they enhance the development of strategies that promote sustainability, focusing on cultural heritage preservation and supporting local needs. Furthermore, by analysing visitor preferences and behaviors, these models help identify tourists who are inclined towards sustainable practices and cultural appreciation. This ensures the attraction of a visitor base oriented towards sustainability goals.

Another aspect considered in this paper is the use of artificial intelligence in destination management, not only for the deeper understanding of tourists' needs but mainly for stakeholders responsible for creating customised branded experiences rather than uncoordinated visitor experiences. Finally, this paper highlights the significant role of BIMs in connecting tourism development and sustainability, demonstrating their potential for an inclusive approach to destination management. By integrating advanced information models into tourism practices, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how technology and data can drive sustainable cultural tourism strategies.

Key words: *Business Information Models, AI in tourism, cultural tourism, sustainability*

Introduction

Tourism represents one of the most powerful economic and developmental sectors globally but currently, many destinations are unable to effectively respond to the increasing tourist demand and the challenges that come with. Sustainability is now a central focus in the evolution of business models within the tourism sector. The dominant trend is a shift toward integrating environmental, social, and economic sustainability into core business strategies, with growing emphasis on innovation, collaboration, and inclusivity as well as appropriate planning that addresses both emerging challenges and capitalizes on new opportunities. Understanding the impacts and issues associated with sustainable tourism development in business models is essential for focusing on more effective and sustainable management strategies, benefiting both local communities and visitors.

Achieving sustainable tourism management requires balancing the often-conflicting needs and interests of various stakeholders and at the same time recognizing the interconnected nature of these relationships. Managing such dynamics demands for active participation and collaboration among all parties involved, each respecting the role of the others. Moreover, tourism is recognized as a key sector for advancing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with research showing that tourism activities are associated with 14 out of the 17 SDGs. Tourism can positively impact goals such as poverty reduction, gender equality, economic growth, and sustainable communities, but can also have negative effects on goals like health, gender equality, and environmental sustainability if not managed responsibly (Poulimenou et al, 2022; Makhdoom et al, 2024). Sustainable business models in tourism, such as those based on the circular economy or inclusive business practices, are being discussed and implemented to align with the SDGs.

These models focus on reducing negative impacts and maximizing positive contributions to society and the environment (Rosato et al, 2021). Furthermore, there is a move toward transforming traditional business models into green or sustainable business models (SBMs), often requiring significant innovation in products, technology, and organizational processes (Elmo et al, 2020). Taking the above into consideration, this research has been initiated in the framework of a European co-funded project, named “Indiana: Intelligent Management System”, implemented by Ionian University, Corfu Greece in collaboration with DOTSOFT S.A.. The INDIANA project involves the research, design, and development of an innovative platform that disseminates tourist and cultural Points of Interest (POIs) to travelers, on a highly personalized level, with the use of state-of-the-art technologies, Big Data and Artificial Intelligence.

The Evolution and Significance of Business Models in the Digital Economy and Tourism

In today’s world, both mature and developing tourism markets are indeed facing new conditions that require the redesigning and updating of their strategies. Emerging markets, in particular, are in need to implement robust and innovative marketing strategies tailored to their unique characteristics and needs (Zhao, 2023). Businesses, institutions and policy makers are currently looking for ways to promote and consolidate a sustainable presence, responding to multidimensional tourism behavior (Conti et al, 2023). Over the past decade, the traditional value chain of tourism services has been strongly challenged due to various factors such as intense competition that goes beyond the traditional boundaries of the industry, technological progress that brings about rapid changes in the business environment, diversified tourism behavior in the post-COVID period, new regulatory and normative requirements requiring increased adaptability (Gruchmann et al, 2022). These conditions inevitably lead to a reshaping and re-approaching of the tourism market.

Within this context, the creation, capture and diffusion of business value are re-examined, with business models taking on a central role in both academic research and management practice. Business models research reveals that there is an urgent need for innovation to overcome outdated practices (Geissdoerfer et al, 2018; Velu, 2024), while the analysis of traditional and digital business models showcases that they are characterized by flexibility, scalability, highlights the use of modern technologies (such as VR, AR, booking platforms, Big Data, and Machine Learning) and their interconnection with social networks and digital interaction with customers.

Today, business models have become a central focus in academic research and professional practice, including the tourism sector, as is evident by the literature review. Over the decades, the definition of business models has expanded, covering diverse applications and interpretations. Research by Zott, Amit, and Massa (2011) traces the term's academic origins to the 1970s. DaSilva and Turkman (2014) and Novak (2014) trace its first scholarly mention in 1957. Since then, references to business models have surged, reflecting their growing importance. Researchers and scholars have proposed various definitions: Hamel (2002) describes a business model as "a way of doing business," while Tikkanen et al. (2005) define it as a system composed of structural and cognitive elements. Despite initial critiques of the term as simplistic (Magretta, 2002; Ghaziani et al, 2005; Seddon et al., 2004), business models have gained prominence in academic discourse (Zott et al., 2011; DaSilva et al, 2014; Massa et al., 2017). Baden-Fuller and Morgan (2010) introduced the notion of business models as "templates" that can be replicated.

Early studies linked business models to strategy (Porter, 2001; Magretta, 2002), while George and Bock (2011) explored their integration with theoretical frameworks. Veit et al. (2014) positioned business models as an intermediary layer between corporate strategy and operational processes. The present study adopts the definition by Zott and Amit (2010), which views a business model as a structured set of activities, along with the resources and capabilities necessary for execution, either within a firm or through collaborations with partners, suppliers, and customers. This definition underscores the role of resources and value chains in shaping business operations. The digital era has revolutionized business activities through technologies such as Industry 4.0, the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud computing, big data, and blockchain, reshaping value creation and business practices. The intersection of digital technology and business model innovation is now well-established, with researchers offering diverse interpretations. Some equate digital business models with technology-driven frameworks like IoT-based models, while Katunskis and Neamtu (2016) examine them through the lens of Industry 4.0. Veit et al. (2014) define digital business models as those in which "changes in digital technologies drive fundamental transformations in business operations and revenue generation." This perspective highlights the disruptive impact of information and communication technologies, particularly in the tourism sector. The adoption of digital innovations not only redefines processes and strategies but also necessitates continuous adaptation to evolving market conditions.

A business model defines how a company creates, delivers, and captures value, forming the foundation for revenue generation, customer targeting, and product or service offerings. Key components include cost structures, distribution channels, customer relationships, and strategic partnerships. Common business models range from subscription and freemium to direct sales, franchising, and e-commerce, each providing a structured roadmap for operational success and competitiveness. Tourism business models are diverse, addressing specialized traveler needs. The industry's evolving nature demands constant adaptation to technological advancements and shifting consumer preferences. In the framework of this study, we have examined core business modelsand mainly focused on marketplaces that lie on digital technologies for their development. These include:

- ✓ **Online Travel Agencies** (OTAs): These agencies are full-service providers that act as one-stop solutions for travelers.
- ✓ **Tours & Activities (T&A) Marketplaces**: Specialized platforms focusing on enhancing tourism experiences, like specific activity packages and guided tours.
- ✓ **Experience Platforms**: Platforms that offer highly customized activity recommendations with a targeted focus for more nuanced traveler categories.

Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) seem to dominate the market, offering comprehensive services while branching into related sectors like Tours & Activities (T&A) marketplaces and Experience Platforms. This branching out is indicative of how this competitive landscape drives BIMs to expand horizontally, integrating additional services for a holistic experience.

Evaluation of Business Models in Tourism

The evaluation of business models in tourism is based on a series of criteria that affect their success and sustainability. For the proper evaluation of the above-mentioned cases, the examination of the following criteria has been conducted:

- ✓ **Revenue Model**: Revenue sources and pricing strategies.
- ✓ **Customer Acquisition and Retention**: Strategies for attracting and retaining customers.
- ✓ **Value Proposition**: The key features that differentiate the service in the market.
- ✓ **Technological Infrastructure**: The role of technology in the operation and development of the model.
- ✓ **Target Audience and Market Segment**: The focus on specific categories of travelers and needs.
- ✓ **Scalability Capabilities**: The ability to adapt and geographically expand the
- ✓ model.
- ✓ **Competitiveness and Customer Satisfaction**: Evaluation of the market position and the degree of customer satisfaction.

From the revenue model to customer satisfaction, each aspect plays a role in the overall value that a platform offers to both users and partners. The types of revenue streams, such as commissions or subscriptions, determine the financial viability, while customer acquisition channels, such as social media, contribute to attracting and retaining the customer base. Differentiating the value proposition is equally important, making services unique and competitive in a crowded market. At the same time, the technological infrastructure, which more and more includes the use of AI and Big Data, can improve the user experience and enhance the security of the platforms used by the different business models (Deliyannis et al, 2023). Targeting specific demographic groups or niche markets, adapting to local needs, geographic reach and strategic partnerships contribute to market scalability and reach. Finally, market competitiveness depends on competitive advantage, while customer satisfaction is influenced by reviews and the way the business responds to their needs. It has been mentioned that smart tourism and circular economy can drive value creation and business model innovation in tourism companies and destinations, promoting sustainability and local involvement (Del Vecchio et al, 2021).

Analysis results for core business models in tourism

The conducted analysis allowed the identification of opportunities for innovation and strategic development in the tourism sector, offering valuable information for the optimization of business models and their adaptation to new technological and consumer trends. The analysis of the criteria for the examined core business models has shown the basic differences in concept and development that may affect sustainability strategies. Apart from literature

review, data and information were collected from the relevant tourism platform, such as Expedia, Booking, Airbnb Experiences, GetyourGuide and Live the World. Specifically, the classification of the models was based on the type of services, the geographical scope of their services, their charged to uses. Subsequently, additional services provided were identified as well as their overlap between the examined business models. The services researched were: AI Assistance, Accommodation/travel, Itinerary planner, Ready itineraries, Simple Activity Suggestions, Tour Oriented, Local Activities, Reviews/Ratings, Smart functions (Push Notifications, Weather, Chat, etc), Discovery.

In terms of revenue models, Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) operate primarily on a commission basis from hotels, airlines, and other service providers. There may also be a subscription basis for premium services. Consequently, they leverage a wide range of partnerships, ensuring stable revenue streams, although they rely heavily on commissions. Tour and Activity Marketplaces (T&A MSPs) also operate on a commission basis from activity providers, with the possibility of direct sales. They may also charge listing fees for providers. Commissions are often lower than those of OTAs, but their model is more flexible, as it allows for service differentiation. Experience Recommendation Platforms often rely on advertising or sponsored partnerships with experienced providers. Direct sales or premium subscriptions for exclusive recommendations are also possible. Consequently, they have a low direct revenue stream without extensive partnership networks and their model is mainly adapted to digital advertising and affiliation. In terms of customer acquisition and retention, OTAs have a strong presence in social media, SEO (Search Engine Optimization), and loyalty programs and have strong brands (identity). Recognition and prices often attract new users, but there is a significant dependence on customer loyalty. T&A MSPs rely on social networks and partnerships with influencers or travel bloggers. They often rely on local communities to retain their customers. The model is therefore focused on local content and niche audiences and is dependent on SEO and partnerships with local partners. Experience Recommendation Platforms also leverage SEO, content marketing, and a strong social media strategy for experience recommendations and reviews. The model is therefore based on curated content and personalized recommendations, but at the same time customer loyalty becomes difficult, as it often functions as an information source.

The value proposition of OTAs is that they offer a wide range of options at competitive prices, but they often do not differentiate themselves significantly from each other. In terms of user experience, OTAs offer user-friendly platforms with mobile applications and search tools. T&A MSPs differentiate themselves by offering unique local experiences and personalized activity packages. These platforms are usually easy to use but may have fewer options for comparing options. Experience Recommendation Platforms offer highly customized recommendations for specific audiences and personalized experiences. These are usually simple, user-friendly platforms with content aimed at personalization. As far as technology infrastructures of each model in relation to platform design, service integration, use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data, and user security, OTAs have platforms available for mobile and desktop, while mobile applications are usually a priority. There are integrated third-party services such as flights, hotels, and rental cars. Regarding AI and Big Data, extensive use of data for recommendations and dynamic pricing is utilized. The focus on data security due to the volume of personal information is strong. T&A MSPs platforms are available for mobile and desktop, with an emphasis on mobile applications. They present less integration with third parties compared to OTAs, but more integration of local experiences. They make limited use of AI, although it can be used for customer insights and activity suggestions. Data protection is adequate, but with less complexity compared to OTAs. Experience Recommendation Platforms usually have responsive design for websites and apps. They have fewer integrations with flights and stays but collaborate with local

experience providers. They use AI for personalized experience recommendations, based on preferences. Finally, they provide reliable data security, but also less reliance on personal information compared to OTAs.

In terms of **target audience and market segment** to which each case is addressed are examined, OTAs are considered more suitable for the mass market, without addressing a specific demographic. In terms of market segment, the model targets all types of travelers—economy, luxury, business. There is a low degree of personalization beyond possible loyalty programs provided. The T&A MSPs model targets new travelers and experience seekers. It focuses on local and personalized experiences for leisure travelers. In this case, there is a high degree of customization with specific local experiences. Experience Recommendation Platforms target audiences seeking personalized experiences and recommendations. The model focused on niche markets with specialized offerings. Highly personalized experiences are provided, designed for individual users.

Regarding the **scalability and market reach** of the models, their geographical reach, partnerships and local adaptation have been examined. OTAs have a global reach with a local presence. They enter into numerous strategic alliances with airlines and hotels. Regarding local adaptation, they adapt well to different markets. In the case of T&A MSPs, the model is usually focused on local markets, but easily scalable. Partnerships are entered into with local businesses, hotels, and travel agencies, while regarding local adaptation, the model seems to be very well adapted to local characteristics. Finally, Experience Recommendation Platforms are often limited to specific regions or niche markets. They have fewer official partners and focus on local experiences. Effective adaptation for local culture and language is achieved.

In the **market competitiveness** section, the competitive advantages of each model and the entry barriers it raises have been examined. OTAs provide a wide selection of products and competitive prices. Entry barriers are the difficulty for new businesses due to large initial capital and strong competition. The competitive advantage of T&A MSPs lies in supporting more personalized local experiences, while entry barriers are lower compared to OTAs. Competition from large platforms is high. Experience Recommendation Platforms offer Personalized experience recommendations and personalized content. Here too, the entry barriers are quite low, but scaling internationally is difficult.

Finally, the perspective on **customer satisfaction and reviews** has been examined. In OTAs, customer ratings are usually positive for ease of use, but there are often complaints about customer service. Responses to customer comments are typical and complaint handling is often slow. In T&A MSPs, local experiences are usually highly valued, and the models are characterized by high quality of service. Also, a quick response to complaints is observed due to their smaller size. Finally, in Experience Recommendation Platforms, trust is observed in ratings for the quality of recommendations. While the response rate to user comments is usually good, as is the communication with users.

Our analysis revealed significant gaps in existing business models, particularly in the integration of AI-driven personalization, seamless multi-service integration, and localized experience curation. While many platforms excel in core travel services, holistic service ecosystems that combine AI-powered itinerary planning, real-time smart notifications, and user-generated content remain underdeveloped. Moreover, platforms tend to specialize in either accommodation/travel bookings or experience-based tourism, but few successfully bridge the gap between the two. A hybrid model that integrates both elements, leveraging AI and big data analytics to create personalized, adaptable itineraries, could offer a competitive advantage. Additionally, the importance of sustainability and eco-friendly tourism models is growing, yet remains a relatively untapped segment in the mainstream travel industry.

Operational Criteria for User Experience (UX)

The research also focused on user experience in travel platforms as a crucial factor in their success and appeal. From booking platforms such as Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) to activity marketplaces and experience recommendation platforms, accessibility, ease of use, personalization and post booking communication play a significant role in user interaction. Especially user experience and accessibility are essential for travel platforms, impacting interactivity and user satisfaction. OTAs stand out for their comprehensive experience, from seamless navigation and personalization to accessibility and post-booking communication. Activity marketplaces emphasize the easy search for experiences, offering basic accessibility features but lacking the detailed filtering options of OTAs. Experience recommendation platforms, while more limited in features, excel in simplicity and tailored content discovery. However, the absence of a booking process means they do not prioritize post-booking communication and change management. The evolution of digital platforms towards greater accessibility and user-friendliness remains critical for differentiation in the tourism services market.
The detailed criteria as analysed by the research are as follows:

	OTAs	**Activity Marketplaces**	**Experience Recommendation Platforms**
Ease of Use	Clear menus, step-by-step booking process (search, filters, selection, payment), strong search functions with extensive filters.	Generally intuitive, though activity variety can cause confusion; simpler booking steps than OTAs; intuitive search but with fewer filters.	Simplified navigation, no booking process, primarily recommendation-based search.
Visual Design and Aesthetics	Professional, modern design with detailed information; responsive, but loading times may vary due to heavy data usage	Visually appealing, image-driven design; mobile-friendly, though media-heavy content may impact speed	Minimalistic design, emphasizing content discovery; fast loading speeds with lightweight media.
Personalization	Personalized suggestions based on past searches and purchases; users can save destinations and options; offers extensive local adaptation (languages, currencies).	Location-based recommendations; option to save activities or tours; limited localization compared to OTAs but often supports local languages.	Highly personalized recommendations based on interests; option to save suggestions; localized experiences reflecting local culture.
Search Functionality and Filters	Extensive filtering options (price, amenities, dates, ratings); high relevance of search results tailored to user preferences.	Basic filters (dates, activity type); some specialized filters (family-friendly, eco-friendly activities); relevant but less tailored results.	Fewer filters focused on recommendations; highly personalized results based on user preferences.
Booking Process	Detailed process with direct payment and	Less complex than OTAs but still involves direct	No direct booking process;

	transparent cost presentation; flexible cancellation policies.	booking and payment; often provides cancellation policies.	recommendations only, with no cancellation policies.
Trust and Reliability	Large volume of verified user reviews; secure payment processes with SSL and other trust signals.	Reliable reviews, though fewer than OTAs; secure transactions but with fewer guarantees.	Relies on user-generated reviews, focusing on authenticity rather than payment guarantees.
Post-Booking Experience	Comprehensive communication with regular updates via email or apps; easy booking management (modifications/cancellations); often provides travel tips and loyalty programs.	Notifications about activity changes, though less frequent than OTAs; tools for booking management, sometimes requiring third-party interactions; occasional loyalty programs or discounts.	No booking management; may send emails with personalized suggestions or guides but lacks booking-related updates or loyalty programs.
Accessibility	Significant investments in accessibility; compatibility with screen readers, voice commands, text magnification, and color contrast adjustments; adheres to WCAG standards.	Fewer accessibility tools but increasing compliance with WCAG standards; limited filtering for accessible activities; accessibility information depends on activity providers.	Basic accessibility features such as text magnification and color adjustment; WCAG compliance varies; lacks detailed accessibility information and filters.

These results suggest that Online Travel Agencies generally offer user-friendly navigation and clear booking processes with robust search and filter functions, while Activity Marketplaces and Experience Recommendation Platforms may enhance booking experiences through personalized recommendations but can differ in navigation simplicity and clarity depending on their platform design and integration of social or collaborative features. Aesthetic design principles in online travel and experience platforms can enhance user attention and engagement, influencing user behavior. In this framework platforms commonly personalize user experiences by analyzing past behavior and interests to provide tailored recommendations and adaptive interfaces, while some also incorporate localization features to further enhance customer relevance.In terms of accessibility the platforms mainly cater user needs by following Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) standards, using tools such as accessibility evaluators and testing software to ensure compliance, but differences exist in the range and effectiveness of accessibility tools and the provision of information to users and developers.

Conclusions

This study highlighted the evolutionary landscape of digital business models in the tourism sector and underscores the need for continuous adaptation to technological advancements and shifting consumer preferences. The identification of service gaps and emerging opportunities presents a roadmap for future innovation, emphasizing the role of AI-driven customization, smart functionalities, and integrated service ecosystems in shaping the next generation of tourism business models.The research showcased several benefits in the current development of business models in tourism, such as the personalization of suggestions based on user profiles, the real-time booking capability through user-friendly interfaces and the enriching

experiences using tools such as digital guides, VR/AR and live updates. On the other hand, several gaps have been identified such as the lack of comprehensive information for unorganized activities or small providers, limited use of predictive analytics to predict traveler needs and reduced connection between different platforms for a holistic user experience.

Based on the above, the following steps of the research include the drafting of improvement strategies, focused on sustainable tourism management, such as the development of unified platforms that connect and integrate information from OTAs, Tour Marketplaces and Experience Platforms, the application of machine learning models to predict traveler needs based on historical data and preferences and the use of performance indicators o measure traveler satisfaction. The results of the research showed that the existing business models provide strong bases, however, they show room for improvement through the use of advanced technologies. The INDIANA project can contribute substantially to bridging the gaps identified, promoting personalization and enhancing the traveler's experience.

Acknowledgements

This research has been co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund of the European Union and Greek national funds through the Operational Program Competitiveness, Entrepreneurship and Innovation, under the call "Partnerships between Enterprises and Research and Knowledge Transfer Organizations in the fields of RIS3 of the Region Ionian Islands with the id: IONP2-0075453. Gratitude towards all collaborators and participants in the project.

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