Suppliers' perceptions on engaging in smart destinations: Evidence from Ljubljana

Abstract

Although it is acknowledged in research and practice that multiple, diverse tourism stakeholders are essential for the development of smart destinations, local tourism supplier participation is still lacking. There is limited understanding of how to engage suppliers in these collaborations, hence, this study explores suppliers' perceptions on their engagement with the development of smart initiatives in Ljubljana, Slovenia. A qualitative approach, based on semi-structured interviews, was undertaken. The findings revealed that involvement in smart destination development is based on relational influences that were based on existing collaborative relationships. Organisational factors influenced supplier engagement prior to and during collaboration. Engagement influences are also specific to the destination context, which were related to historical cultural norms. These further facilitated or hindered suppliers' involvement. The paper draws valuable conclusions for leaders of smart developments, destination management organisations, tourism associations and businesses in Ljubljana and further afield where there is a need for implementation, integration and continuance of smart tourism initiatives.

Research Highlights

- The paper revealed local tourism suppliers' in-depth and nuanced perspectives on engaging in smart destination development.
- The influences of supplier engagement were holistically presented through a variety of relational and organisational factors.
- The study applied qualitative methods to examine Ljubljana, Slovenia, which gave rise to context-specific factors that were both facilitators and inhibitors.

Keywords: collaboration; destination; smart tourism; smart destination development; stakeholder engagement

1. Introduction

Innovation has been lagging in the tourism industry despite its importance for improving traveller experiences and destination efficiency, and for increasing competitiveness and restoring traveller confidence in the post pandemic era (WTM, 2022). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide opportunities for creating initiatives underpinning the development of smart destinations (Buhalis, 2019). These enable inter- and intra-destination collaborations, representing both virtual and physical forms of integration for destination management (Gretzel et al., 2015; Fyall & Garrod, 2020; Ivars-Baidal et al., 2019). As a result, there has been a proliferation of smart tourism initiatives in both policy and practice in recent years (example: UNWTO, 2017). As calls for innovation increase, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (2022) encourages practitioners to rethink tourism by launching innovation through alliances with local tourism providers who can develop transformative ideas and products that are inclusive and sustainable. Therefore, it is important to understand the views of tourism suppliers as they significantly influence smart tourism development (Ye et al., 2021).

Indeed, the development of smart destinations results from collaboration among diverse stakeholder groups, of which tourism suppliers provide specialist knowledge, capabilities and resources that can increase destination competitiveness (Gelter et al., 2022). Some of the most recognised collaborations for smart tourism destinations include Forum Virium in Helsinki, Smart City Campus and Innovation District in Barcelona, and Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Metropolitan Solutions in Amsterdam (Boes et al., 2016). However, these collaborations are between global companies, research centres and universities. To date, evidence of local tourism supplier participation is lacking. They are predominantly driven by smart city representatives (see UNWTO, 2022). However, local, community-based tourism practitioners must be at the centre of collaborations to ensure the creation of relevant and meaningful tourist experiences (Nath, 2022).

There is very little research on tourism supplier engagement in developing smart destinations. According to Zuzul (2019), an understanding of engagement by active suppliers is needed to provide practical insights for current and prospective practitioners who are challenged with developing smart initiatives. Ye et al. (2021) and Sun et al. (2022), being the only studies to date on tourism suppliers, conclude that engagement is based solely on macro-environmental

barriers, which are contextual conditions (Shafiee et al., 2019). However, this article finds organisational and relational influences and examines their implications for the field.

Cai et al. (2020), Gretzel et al. (2020) and Mehraliyev et al. (2020) call for different theoretical perspectives to broaden understanding of smart development. While there has been increased uptake in smart research since 2015 (Johnson & Samakovlis, 2019), it is predominantly focused on technology adoption models that emphasise individual technology users or organisations (Cai et al., 2020; Soares et al., 2020), rather than the drivers of stakeholder engagement. Yet, Boes et al.'s (2016) call for smart destinations to be perceived as more than simply technology and rather as sites of co-creation and collaboration among individuals has remained unanswered.

The aim of this study is to explore suppliers' perceptions of their engagement with the development of smart initiatives at the destination level to elucidate the relational factors of inter-organisational collaboration in smart tourism destination contexts. This study is relevant since the need to implement smart initiatives to address issues such as overcrowding, which have resurfaced since the COVID-19 pandemic recovery have resurfaced (The Guardian, 2021). The approach taken is via De Wit's (2017) extension of the stakeholder identification theory into organisations. This represents a novel approach in tourism destination management research despite its relevance to collaboration issues.

The paper first discusses tourism collaboration literature and smart tourism. Following, it explores engagement in the 2019 and 2020 European Smart Capital of Tourism, Ljubljana in Slovenia, where semi-structured interviews were conducted. The suppliers are those directly related to tourism such as accommodation and restaurants, and other suppliers, namely technology-related businesses. Subsequently, the paper examines the factors influencing suppliers' behaviour. The paper concludes by drawing implications which are relevant for prospective and current destination practitioners engaged in smart formation, implementation and maintenance.

2. Literature review

2.1 Smart tourism destinations

Lopez de Avila (2015, n.p.) states that a smart destination is

> "an innovative tourist destination, built on an infrastructure of state-of-the-art technology guaranteeing the sustainable development of tourist areas, accessible to everyone, which facilitates the visitor's interaction with and integration into his or her surroundings, increases the quality of the experience at the destination, and improves residents' quality of life".

Smart destinations are ecosystems for destinations to achieve competitiveness (Boes et al., 2016). Ecosystems comprise of tourism actors who are considered to be fundamental for attaining the long-term destination goal (Del Chiappa & Baggio, 2015; Gretzel et al., 2015). In this case, smart destinations are similar to smart cities, conceived as innovative ecosystems for solving problems of urbanisation (Ciasullo et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2022). Both smart cities and smart destinations are inscribed using the biological metaphor- ecosystem (Moore, 1993). However, there remains a lack of conceptual development in tourism research, which is also the case further afield in business and computer science studies. This has led to a wider debate on the differences and commonalities between ecosystems and network collaborations, of which the latter is more established in tourism.

Gueler and Schneider (2021) propose that an ecosystem is different from a collaborative network. It represents a new means of association where value propositions should be delivered by and for the benefit of a group and not solely individual suppliers. Businesses must perceive themselves as being members of an ecosystem that incorporates a variety of industries rather than members of a single sector. Ecosystems co-evolve with an increase in actor diversity and interactions. However, Aarikka-Stenroos and Ritala (2017) argue that all ecosystems contain inter-organisational collaborations. A deeper exploration of the latter can provide significant theoretical understanding of how an ecosystem of suppliers behave (Iansiti & Levien, 2004; Shipilov & Gawer, 2020).

Suppliers play an important role in developing smart destination initiatives. They are needed to co-create service offerings that can personalize and enrich the destination experience rather than focusing solely on sustainability and efficiency (Gretzel & Koo, 2021; McClain, 2021). Very few studies have provided empirical results from industry practitioners regarding the factors that influence stakeholder engagement in smart destination development, despite calls for insights leading to practical development (Ye et al., 2021). For instance, Ivars-Baidal et al. (2017) note that inhibitors of smart development can emerge, such as lack of strategy, limited political terms, inadequate inter-operability of the technological system, lack of

technical competences, low cooperation between the public and private sector, lack of knowledge and insufficient economic resources. Meanwhile, tourist engagement is a facilitator of smart development. However, insights were not based on suppliers who had encounters with smart developments. Ye et al. (2021) garner views from stakeholders in Mainland China and Hong Kong and conclude that engagement is influenced by barriers including problems related to city infrastructure, software, administration, acceptance of smart initiatives by locals and single-source target market issues. While these studies lack the appropriate lens for advancing knowledge development (Mehraliyev et al., 2020), they ultimately represent the few instances where perceptions on engagement in smart destinations have been investigated.

Sun et al. (2022) find the same macro-environmental factors as hindrances. They examined the context of Hong Kong to propose that there are economic, sociocultural, technological, planning and management barriers to developing smart tourism. However, findings were limited only to such challenges and are also presented as being stable and the same. However, individuals' perspectives are heterogeneous in innovative collaborations but are usually overlooked (Benner & Tripsas, 2012). Both Ye et al. (2021) and Sun et al. (2022) applied Ritchie and Crouch's (2003) dimensions of tourism competitiveness, which is focused on macroeconomic conditions. As a result, we lack a granular understanding of those factors that directly affect individual organisations. These can influence suppliers' immediate adoption or interest in collaboration. Shafiee's et al. (2019) model of smart tourism destination development shows that these macro barriers are contextual conditions. There are usually the concerns for destination management executives and municipality representatives rather than tourism businesses (Ritchie & Crouch, 2010). Additionally, ccollaborations cannot be understood solely at the macro-level but must also include the micro-level (Vargo, 2011). This is the strategic-relational level where ttourism and hospitality suppliers interact and engage in decision-making for designing solutions for their destinations (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2021).

Furthermore, it is suggested that contextual factors can influence the development of smart destinations (Gelter et al., 2022). Differences exist in how smart destinations are developed, aligning with local political and social events (Johnson et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2013). In order to gain and maintain support for destination initiatives, policymakers and practitioners need to be aware that a range of facilitators and inhibitors within the network-like collaboration structure can affect stakeholders (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007). Zuzul (2019)

argues that policymakers and developers require diverse and rich insights for strategy formulation and smart development, yet, an increasing number of studies present findings on engagement and involvement in smart tourism using snapshot, cross-sectional research designs.

2.2 Destination collaboration

Gray (1989) states that collaboration is "a process of joint decision making among key stakeholders of a problem domain about the future of that domain" (p. 227). Specifically, destination collaboration can be categorised as either intra or inter-destination collaboration (Fyall et al., 2012). The former represents early forms of engagement among tourism suppliers where collaborations were based on similar entities within destinations. The earliest examples include airline alliances and hotel consortia (Fyall & Garrod, 2005). Stakeholders were mainly driven by the need to share resources for product development and marketing. However, collaborations expanded to include other suppliers, varying in type and production level (Buhalis, 2000). These studies draw on theories of competitive strategy derived from organisational contexts, which are not well-suited for examining destination collaboration. Unlike intra-destination collaborations, some inter-destination collaborations engagements also exist. While these are discussed to a lesser extent, they draw on theories that have been well-cited, such as resource dependency, transaction cost and institutional and relational exchange theory to explain supplier interactions (Fyall et al., 2012).

Ivars-Baidal et al. (2019) conclude that smart destination initiatives can be considered advanced versions of destination management systems (DMS). Smart initiatives incorporate the stakeholders and resources within, and between, destinations. Unlike traditional destinations, smart destinations are technology driven. While there are few studies that have examined stakeholder engagement in technology-based collaborations within tourism (Estêvão et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2012), they mainly focus on micro factors in siloed contexts. Hence, the literature presents a limited number of examples of this type of collaboration. Sigala (2013) concludes that factors influencing stakeholder engagement in destination management systems include perceptions of the destination management organisation (DMO), organisational and managerial aspects and environmental and technological features. In more recent times, Estêvão et al. (2020) garnered insights from stakeholders in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Norway and Sweden, to

understand existing influences and found that most of the factors were at the organisational level. Challenges included limited time available for training staff and effectively managing systems, the technical and general knowledge needed for implementing and using systems and lack of e-readiness, such as the infrastructure and, skills required for using technological devices and application software.

Despite these insights on technology-driven destination collaborations, findings are mainly focused on organisational and technology-related factors. The factors emerging from most destination level studies have similar constructs to the technology adoption models, such as corporate and environmental factors (see Collins & Buhalis, 2003; Wang, 2008). Destination management systems research has emphasised a transactional approach to collaborative development, meaning that the organisation is positioned as the beneficiary and focus of control (Soares et al., 2020). Technological models are aligned with this strategic approach and ignore the potential relationships of suppliers within tourism destinations. Hence, a relational approach is needed, drawing on theories applied in collaboration research (Fyall & Garrod, 2005).

2.3 Stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory, emerging from Freeman's (1984) work, is closely linked to the development of smart initiatives (Tom Dieck & Jung, 2017; Yadav et al., 2021). This perspective considers that suppliers engaging in collaboration can affect, or are affected by, the group's goals (Freeman, 1984). However, the theory is insufficient to provide specific details useful for policymakers and government officials to implement, develop, and sustain smart tourism developments. It has been criticised for lacking boundaries that can help shape practices (Currie, 2009). Mitchell et al. (1997) further claim that not all stakeholders are deemed important and will engage. This led to Mitchell et al. (1997) providing a more holistic understanding through the development of theory of stakeholder identification, which claims that stakeholders are salient to others once one of the following are perceived: power, legitimacy and urgency. Power refers to a resource or trait a collaboration facilitator has in order to have control (Ruhanen, 2013; Tiew et al., 2015). Legitimacy is "a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values and beliefs" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Urgency signifies "the degree to which stakeholder claims call for immediate attention"

(Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 867). Jamal and Stronza (2009) propose the use of Mitchell et al.'s (1997) factors to further explore tourism collaboration, which has been applied in tourism collaboration (Adongo & Kim, 2018).

De Wit (2017), later extended Mitchell et al.'s (1997) theory, proposing specific influences known as relational factors of inter-organisational collaboration, power, legitimacy, urgency and frequency. Frequency, being newly added, indicates the rate of active communication and interaction among stakeholders in an inter-organisational relationship. Frequency has been noted in tourism collaboration research, however, not in association with power, legitimacy and urgency (Beritelli, 2011). Frequency is highly relevant to smart destination contexts as Zuzul (2019) noted that partner selection in smart city developments is often based on prior interactions. Recently, Wood, Mitchell, Agle and Bryan (2021) conducted an extensive review of their work and also called for future studies to consider whether individuals perceive stakeholders differently within the same collaboration (Wood et al., 2021).

While varying types of destination collaborations have been examined in the literature, there is still a limited understanding of those that are technology-driven destination collaborations. Much extent research adopts a technological lens to examining collaboration, which ignores the embeddedness of the supplier within relationships, also known as a relational approach (see Figure 1). However, this is yet to be applied in tourism research despite its importance to destination collaborations. An understanding of engagement in smart destination development still requires deeper insights from practitioners as there is limited knowledge on those perspectives (Sun et al., 2022; Ye et al., 2021).

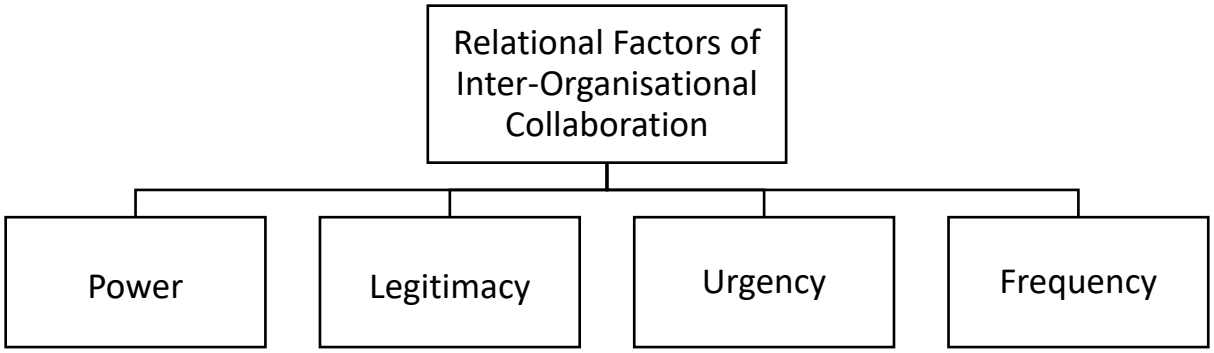

Figure 1: Conceptual Model Used to Guide the Study

3. Smart Ljubljana

Previous research has tended towards a techno-centric rather than socio-technical perspectives to smart development which hinders a more holistic interpretation of a process that is both technological and human-centric (Hollands, 2015). The central use of a technological perspective in smart literature has limited knowledge development in the field (Gretzel et al., 2020). In response, other researchers acknowledge a socio-technical understanding of smart (Tom Dieck & Jung, 2018; Yadav et al., 2021). This paper builds on the latter to examine suppliers' perspectives in engaging with the smart destination of Ljubljana in Slovenia. Ljubljana.

Ljubljana is a 2019 and 2020 European Capital of Smart Tourism. Since the 1990s, Slovenia's branding campaigns have been consistently aligned with the image of sustainability, with no direct focus on campaigns and strategies for digitisation due, in part, to the destination's unique historical context. After gaining independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, Slovenia underwent a re-imaging process due to the negative impact of the succession wars. Its destination campaigns were dominantly focused on sustainability (Hall, 2003).

Like other European smart destinations, such as Italy, Spain, France and the United Kingdom (Mehraliyev et al., 2020), Slovenia is considered a developed economy (UN, 2014). However, compared to its European counterparts and other well-cited smart destinations, the country has low technology adoption, which places it somewhat at odds with the dominant technological view taken by smart destinations. For example, Slovenia has a low technology adoption rate for mobile telephone and mobile broadband subscriptions. Only 45% of its population are internet users, based on the Global Competitiveness Report for 2019 (WEF, 2019).

4. Methodology

A constructionist, interpretive paradigm was chosen for this research in order to provide details that can guide smart developers. Qualitative inquiry enables a focus on the diverse stakeholders involved and their perspectives on influencing engagement in smart initiatives. Data was gathered via semi-structured interviews.

Ljubljana has over 45 smart initiatives, as indicated by the city's smart initiatives lead. Previous research was considered in order to select consistent examples of smart initiatives for analysis (Femenia-Serra et al., 2018; Gajdosik, 2020; Jovicic, 2019; Roopchund, 2020). Thus, the following initiatives were chosen for the study: green supply chain web platforms, Taste Ljubljana, the Ljubljana by Wheelchair mobile application, museum multisensory guided tours, mobile audio guides, mobile parking, a digital city guide, electric car sharing, tourist card Urbana and a bike-sharing scheme (Table A.1).

Ljubljana's smart tourism destination was analysed with particular attention to the tourism businesses and practices of smart tourism engagement within the city. First, a purposeful interview sampling technique was employed. Second, a list of potential companies was developed by reviewing the smart initiatives Ljubljana submitted for the European Union smart tourism competition in 2019, in keeping with commonly identified suppliers in smart tourism (Gretzel et al., 2015b; Koo et al., 2017). Then, a snowball sampling technique was used to facilitate exposure and connections to other suppliers, as participants identified other relevant members involved in Ljubljana's smart development (Timur & Getz, 2009). Data collection ran from February to September 2019.

Data collected through interviews provided flexibility, with a mix of closed questions requiring short answers and open questions that encourage discussion (Wilson, 2010). Questions surrounding power were more difficult to operationalise, which is not an uncommon issue in tourism research (Xue and Kerstetter 2018). It was important to garner suppliers' feedback about tourism, smart tourism and influences on their engagement. Since these questions were crafted for semi-structured interviews, the process allowed for follow-up questions during the conversation. Care was taken to ensure that the research exercised flexibility during the interview phase, allowing data to emerge from its natural setting (Yin, 2014).

Table A.2 provides a sample of the interview questions and respective themes, such as general details and influences of engagement. The interview questions proposed were confirmed through pilot tests of four smart destinations with five representatives during February 2019. Destinations included Spain (Barcelona and Madrid), Helsinki, Amsterdam and Copenhagen. Following analysis of the data captured in the telephone interviews, the question protocols were confirmed. Unbeknown of the research intention to focus on Ljubljana, one pilot study participant even recommended that representatives in Ljubljana be included in the study.

In Ljubljana, a total of 24 semi-structured interviews were completed, representing 31 separate businesses categorised as hotels, attractions, destination management organisations, the transportation sector, educational institutions, technology companies and the municipal government. Some participants managed marketing for more than one business. Interviews lasted 20–66 minutes and were digitally recorded (see Table A.3). For anonymity, a table capturing the name and role of each participant was not included. In addition, participants' quotes presented in the findings did not include the organisation or individual roles but instead were noted using numbers.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) commonly used procedure was followed, comprising three forms of coding and theme development: deductive, inductive and latent. First, a codebook was developed (see Table A.4), based on De Wit's (2017) relational factors. The researchers engaged with the definitions provided by De Wit (2017) to ensure the codes were credible, as shown in Table A.4. A pre-determined codebook enables researchers to accurately identify the information that is relevant for each

theme. It provides a systematic and rigorous approach to doing thematic analysis during early theme development (Braun et al., 2018).

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis involve six phases: data familiarity, generating initiatives codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. Data familiarity entailed making notes from initial reading after the interviews. Notes were also created during the data transcription in NVivo software. Generating codes involved assigning labels that described the context of the data. Searching for themes entailed capturing patterned responses in the data set. Then, the themes were reviewed related to each other to ensure coherence, weak themes were removed. This step was followed by theme redefining and repositioning. For instance, legitimacy changed to an organisational factor for external organisations. Although the coding framework was based on a deductive, theory-driven framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the coding process was not limited to this approach. During the process, the researchers allowed new findings to emerge, facilitating an inductive approach. For instance, uncertainty, organisational and destination size appeared as factors influencing engagement. Thematic analysis is a reflective, iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2006); hence, themes developed during the coding process.

5. Results, analysis and discussion

This section draws attention to the different influences that emerged following the thematic analysis, classified under two main headings: relational and organisational factors. First, the relational factors are introduced, showing the emergent aspects affecting collaboration. Then, the organisational factors are presented, illustrating emerging influences that entities can directly control and change. Finally, the discussion draws attention to various perspectives regarding the factors, which is not mentioned in destination collaboration research. Results show that while Ljubljana adopts an ecosystem structure to attract multiple stakeholders and establish long-term value propositions for the destination, the smart destination provides value for formally and informally connected suppliers whose behaviours are associated with expectations of a collaboration.

5.1 Relational factors

Involvement in smart destination development is based on relational factors that were linked to previous collaborative relationships. The relational influences that emerged from the thematic analysis, namely power and frequency of interactions, are discussed below:

5.1.1 Power

Figures of power control and influence tourism suppliers based on their resources and associations. Power is evident in the form of the DMO and municipality:

> "Ljubljana has its own touristic institution, DMO, which is developing the strategies." (Participant 12)

> "The app [mobile application] was developed by DMO." (Participant 6)

Tourism business executives described the DMO as developing plans and smart initiatives, engaging with tourism suppliers and promoting the platforms, expanding on Jovicic's (2019) conceptualisation of the DMO's role in a smart destination. Jovicic (2019) notes that the DMO is required to engage in two-way, real-time communication with tourists to promote destination offerings. However, in Ljubljana, the role is perceived as centred on developing the plans and platforms rather than exchanging with tourists online.

The DMO's position was portrayed by suppliers as having significant responsibilities in smart development. They saw this as the norm for the DMO as they reflected on other collaborative relationships, they had with the organisation such as forming networks to showcase products at travel tradeshows. Individuals were influenced to become actively involved having had confidence in the DMO based on its actions within these past networks. The DMO's power to influence was based on its resources. Some local tourism operators were not able to fund and attend regional and global travel tradeshows to further promote their organisations and have since chose to continue their engagement with the DMO. These opportunities provided organisations with collaborative advantage.

However, the DMO's view is different from the suppliers' perspectives as they disassociated their organisations from such power titles during the interviews. Instead, DMO executives labelled the organisation as "an active partner" (Participant 8), working alongside municipality representatives. The municipality office was perceived as the key influence in Ljubljana's smart development, but reference was mainly directed to the mayor. Stakeholder

resources as a key power influence was not instrumental in this case when compared to the situation with the DMO. Participant 3 confirmed that the mayor influenced local engagement with no noticeable resistance. The participant did not find this surprising based on the hierarchical framework that had underpinned Slovenia for decades before its independence. This broadens understanding of smart destination development as being linked to historical processes:

> "I'm not sure if you were able to travel also to other republics of former Yugoslavia, ahhm and see the differences. The main difference why Slovenia was able to go, follow this sustainability route so quickly is also about this culture and this discipline about the fact that Slovenia was under all the time, under this Austro-Hungarian, part of Italians." (Participant 3)

The mayor's attitude and ability to influence were shaped by past and present situations in Ljubljana. Leadership style was based on traits that associated with both transformational and autocratic leaders. The overlap in leadership styles differ from previous studies, which identify transformational leaders as being essential in the development of tourism contexts related to technology (Spencer et al., 2012). The transformational leadership style was evident in the mayor's ability to communicate and inspire the local populace. However, in contrast to Spencer et al. (2012), the autocratic traits were mainly emphasised by stakeholders. These caused some individuals to reconsider their involvement and role in smart development: "Actually this is the template for anything. We should ask mayor. Really, I don't like to ask him. Just leave me and I will do my job". The level of supplier input during smart development was less when compared to instances where suppliers were being influenced by the DMO. Although smart implies connectivity and involvement with a destination network (Gretzel et al., 2015), findings show that there are varying levels of engagement due to the type of power.

Individuals and organisations control suppliers within a tourism collaboration process by influencing their decisions to participate and engage in activities (De Wit, 2017; Jamal & Getz, 1995). Local individual responses are tied to historical national cultural norms that promote central control despite being in a collaborative environment, which is more participative, consensus-oriented and empowering. Supplier relationships are underpinned by varying forms of power, which is expected in collaborations but not ecosystems (Akpinar & Vincze, 2016).

5.1.2 Frequency of interactions

Tourism suppliers engage with other businesses that they have ongoing relationships with in the destination. These relationships were unlike the formal ties for destination marketing, which involved the DMO. Suppliers were influenced to engage in Ljubljana's smart development once there were others from their informal networks. This insight broadens understanding of smart tourism as not only being based on complex networks (Shafiee et al., 2019) but also informal ones. These networks refer to those who they had relationships with for resource sharing in times of challenges. Ljubljana suppliers interacted with neighbouring businesses regularly, which led to sharing of resources from staff to parking facilities and rooms needed to accommodate hotel room group blocks and instances of overbooking. These situations were ongoing occurrences but were mainly linked to frequently held conferences in the city. These businesses are deemed to be reliable. This is becoming more important as smart initiatives are questioned as a fad or fashion.

Our findings show that frequent interactions are linked to Ljubljana's previous and present political contexts. Unlike Ivars-Baidal et al. (2017) and Gajdosik (2018) research, where insufficient cooperation among tourism businesses was a concern, this was not the case of Ljubljana due to its geographical and close-knit social structure. Participant 3 noted that this was possible as Slovenians were continuously subject to practices fostering inclusion, and this shaped their behaviour:

> "Always having to obey something and people were just, people are trained to obey certain rules or certain quotes. In the villages, there are these codes of conduct that people are just following, everybody." (Participant 3)

While the destination's past as a former Yugoslavian state still greatly influences residents' attitudes, some have changed behaviour with the introduction of a neoliberal society. For example, according to one participant, some suppliers' behaviour changed, resulting in increased competitiveness:

> "So, the neighbour's garden should not be more beautiful than ours. And so, everybody is trying to get its own garden the best. And this attitude is I think very strong reason why people would rather do some things on their own or with their friends or for their people, not together and for a general cause and for a greater cause.

> And I think to change this attitude and to change this mentality uhmm. It takes a lot of things."

As a result, there is resistance by a few suppliers, leading to non-participation with some collaborators because they prefer to embark on individual endeavours. Findings show that businesses place significant importance on their own stakeholder value, which is expected when a firm must contemplate being involved in collaborations. Attainment of individuals' desires are not the central focus for ecosystems; instead, they concentrate on value propositions related to long-standing issues. Furthermore, supplier behaviour is tied to previous historical contexts. This is necessary for understanding stakeholder behaviour in collaborations and is not a requirement for engaging in ecosystems (Moller et al., 2020).

5.2 Organisational factors

Organisational factors also influenced supplier engagement prior and during collaboration. The organisational factors that emerged from the thematic analysis- operations, human resources, marketing and legitimacy- are discussed below:

5.2.1 Operations: organisational infrastructure

Suppliers indicated that the physical infrastructure of their business plays a role in their decision to engage in Ljubljana's smart tourism. Smart developments are not solely derived from modern technologies as conceptualised by prior studies (Shafiee et al., 2019). Also, this finding is in contrast to Leung's (2019) finding that proposed the need for technological systems and infrastructure. For instance, one of the requirements for participating in the wheelchair application was installing the appropriate facilities to accommodate wheelchair users. However, some businesses had been in existence before the 1990s and had not refurbished their facilities. Therefore, they were not equipped with the necessary resources as seen in the following attraction representative feedback:

> "Because it's a very old building and there are, it's very complicated, unfortunately. We would be glad to be a part of this project." (Participant 4)

However, a lack of infrastructure was not a sufficient response for non-participation. Some attraction executives were not able to resist, such as Participant 4, who noted that their actions to "upgrade" were influenced by the DMO, as seen in Participant 12's feedback:

> "They [the DMO] came here. They also made a list of everything we had. They gave us list of recommendations and based on this list of recommendations, we in the next year put in the yearly plan, the upgrades. So, our hall is upgraded for hearing, I mean, the equipment for hearing disabled people and so on and so on." (Participant 12)

The DMO represented a type of hierarchical control, which is expected in collaborations (Moller et al., 2020; Shipilov & Gawer, 2020).

While some suppliers had to make changes, the necessary facilities were already in place in other establishments' locations. For instance, participant 2 recalled that their business decision to be involved with the wheelchair application was associated with its proximity to the elevator. Moreover, Participant 2 depended on the building's owner to maintain the elevator, guaranteeing their business' continuous participation in the wheelchair application. In addition to organisational factors, others were associated with human resources, discussed in the following section.

5.2.2 Human resources: skills and knowledge of staff

The absence of relevant skills and knowledge due to a lack of staff training represents a significant inhibitor to developing smart destinations and destination management systems (Collins & Buhalis, 2003; Estêvão et al., 2020). While some workers have embraced modern approaches and applied them within their businesses, these were still limited cases. Participant 13 was of the view that the security provided by the public sector work environment contributed to this lack of further skills development:

> "They [business owners] do not develop the skills of their own long-term employees. Once the employees get the job, this is very secure environment for money which they then keep until retirement." (Participant 13)

Participant 13 noted that the organisation did not contribute to the skills development of their workforce, inhibiting the company's ability to participate in smart initiatives. Arguably, expertise also could have been sought from other companies involved in Ljubljana's smart

development. However, there has been little socialisation resulting in no optimisation of its ecosystem structure. Successful ecosystems should provide the opportunity for stakeholders to interact and draw on a range of resources and capabilities within and external to their industries (Shipilov & Gawer, 2020). An awareness of the multiplicity of stakeholders involved could have allowed for active sharing of resources, which is one of the roles of suppliers as previously conceptualised in smart tourism research (Buhalis, 2015).

5.2.3 Marketing: benefit of the promotion

The benefit of promotion was explicitly identified as a factor in Ljubljana following the thematic analysis. On some platforms, such as the wheelchair application, the organisations' details are published, including the companies' products, telephone numbers and websites. The suppliers' need for increased promotion is a result of the increasingly competitive environment. Suppliers suggested that smart initiatives not only offered promotion benefits but were also of great significance as it offered promotional opportunities that could not be financed by their companies' budgets. Hence, individuals engaged for mainly for their own benefits, a typical motivation for engaging in collaboration (Moller et al., 2020).

However, Participant 22 briefly noted that another attraction had removed itself from the initiative due to costs. Gajdosik (2018) also finds that concern for money can inhibit tourism businesses from adopting smart initiatives. Participant 22 perceived the initiative as a low-budget option, but that was not the case for all entities. Arguably, other suppliers may also choose to leave in the future based on the increasing cost.

Jurgens et al. (2010) and Shipilov and Gawer (2020) explain that utilising ecosystems for increasing firm competitiveness is often discouraged in the early stage of developing them as it usually prevents growth and focus on fulfilling value propositions. However, this was not the case of Ljubljana. Collaboration and competition are encouraged within inter-organisational networks.

5.2.4 Marketing: needs of visitors

The promotion was not the only perceived influence; appealing to and fulfilling the needs of visitors emerged from the thematic analysis. This influence was key for suppliers due to a

unique situation in Ljubljana. In 2018, the connectivity to European countries made Slovenia accessible and appealing for short-stay travellers with an average length of stay of 2–3 days. Suppliers then had a limited time to cater to and exceed tourists' expectations. If the smart initiatives were specifically designed to cater to the establishment's tourists, they would participate. Participant 6 did not reflect on whether their company's current product was compatible with the demands of their visitors' needs, as was seen in small organisations. Instead, the organisation was ready to participate in smart initiatives because it was claimed to enhance tourist experiences:

> "Everything we do, we have our guests in mind. Our job is to make them feel welcome and we try to anticipate their needs, but also to personalise experience for them. We collaborate with the destination to enhance our guests' experience." (Participant 6)

However, some suppliers halted their involvement as they explained that their businesses did not need to participate since smart collaboration did not meet the needs of their clients. The initiative did not offer the flexibility of providing the personalised experiences that these initiatives have been assumed to offer (Buhalis, 2015; Neuhofer et al., 2012). The supplier noted that the business was required to provide the dishes promoted via the application, offering no flexibility for customers.

In cases where visitors had no interest, some suppliers still engaged. For example, Participant 4 acknowledged that the tourists visiting their establishment were sceptical about utilising services deemed to be smart:

> "When they [tourists] hear that it [the car] is electric, they prefer to have a normal one." (Participant 4)

A lack of interest shown by some tourists did not hamper Participant 4's decision to engage in Ljubljana's smart initiatives. In addition to marketing-related factors, legitimacy also arose as a critical influence of supplier engagement.

5.2.5 Legitimacy: as management guidelines

Legitimacy signifies business-related obligations. These are regulatory in the form of rules and guidelines (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Suppliers act in accordance to organisational and

institutional beliefs, influencing their engagement. In Ljubljana, there are agreements with management companies and municipality ownership that influence supplier engagement. This differs from macro-environmental factor of legislation that has been previously noted in Ivars-Baidal et al. (2017). While stakeholder theory formally acknowledge the influence that parties can have (Freeman, 1984), there is a difference in the power of different stakeholders as the government was acknowledged as a major influence for locally-owned entities while management companies command influence for international hospitality brands.

Aside from tourism collaboration studies, there was a difference in reaction to how public and private suppliers perceived this factor. For instance, the private sector representatives perceived the agreements as documents with instructions that could be adjusted in some cases, thereby having less formality than legal contracts. Participants 10 and 23, representing regional and global brands, noted that activities benefiting their target audiences in Ljubljana were considered first. They made it clear that rules set by their head offices served only as a guide for operations:

> "We mainly follow the headquarters' guidelines and collaborate on a local level wherever possible." (Participant 6)

However, this was not the case for all suppliers. Other suppliers were influenced not based on a management contract but through municipality ownership. For example, the local municipality was interested in preserving Ljubljana's cultural heritage by investing in eleven attractions known as "public institutions" (Participant 22). Participant 10 noted that their organisation was involved with initiatives associated with the municipality based on these contractual agreements:

> "The guidelines which are accepted on the basis of municipality, we are accepting them. We have to do it." (Participant 10)

Participant 10 claimed, "we have to do it", unlike the feedback from private entities bound by agreements. Their actions and successes are connected to their formal network relationships, which is the case of inter-organisational collaborations (Moller et al., 2020).

Other suppliers had varying views regarding rules as factors influencing engagement. For instance, Participant 16 explained that engagement in smart tourism was entirely voluntary, and suppliers could exercise autonomy, as in destination collaborations (Wang, 2008). Participant 16, who represented a technological company working with the local government,

noted that this was not a compulsory process for businesses; they had the freedom to choose whether to participate. These points were echoed by suppliers from private entities, such as Participant 2 adopted a light-hearted approach to the affairs of smart development, despite their business being listed as a participant in the smart initiative, Taste Ljubljana. Unlike some public entities, these views can be explained based on position and association within the smart process. Understandings of collaboration vary among public and private sector entities (Viren et al., 2015).

6. Conclusion and implications

This study responds to calls for advanced theoretical perspectives for understanding smart tourism (Cai et al., 2020; Mehrayliev et al., 2020; Soares et al., 2020) and suppliers' perspectives on engaging in smart destinations (Ye et al., 2021; Zuzul, 2019). Previous insights do not draw attention to the complex nature of engagement. Views are presented as unitary, which is insufficient for ensuring that stakeholders are aware of what they may encounter in smart development (Zuzul, 2019). This study revealed local tourism suppliers' in-depth and nuanced perspectives on engaging in smart destination development. It includes the realisation of different responses among suppliers regarding the influences thereby demonstrating that engagement influences are not generalised or equally applied in destination collaborations. For instance, the paper illustrates that tourism suppliers' perceptions of those in power vary from the views of DMO representatives. In terms of legitimacy, suppliers associated with the public sector based their engagement on requirements passed through contractual agreements. However, private sector representatives associated with developing and implementing smart initiatives believed that collaboration was an entirely voluntary process, indicating inconsistencies regarding the requirements of participating in Ljubljana's smart development.

Drawing on De Wit's (2017) relational factors of inter-organisational collaboration, this paper reveals the influences of engagement in enabling the development of smart initiatives at the destination level. Factors related to technology were not identified by suppliers, as seen in previous smart tourism studies. Instead, suppliers explained that their involvement in smart tourism was influenced by their perceptions of different organisational and relational factors. Relational factors were tied to previous collaborative relationships for resource sharing.

Meanwhile, organisational factors were influences prior and during collaboration at which point (dis)engagement was still possible. This paper reveals the following factors from the thematic analysis of interviews: power (DMO, municipality, mayor and frequency of interactions); marketing (benefits of promotion and needs of visitors); human resources (skills and knowledge of staff); operations (organisational infrastructure); and legitimacy (management agreement and ownership). Amidst the factors shared, suppliers continuously mentioned the mayor as a key influencer, not typical in destination collaborations and smart destinations, as they generally refer to the government (Boes et al., 2016; Choi et al., 2021).

Findings show that context matters when developing smart destinations. Therefore, findings are not always generalisable as seen in previous smart tourism research (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2017). While Ye et al. (2021) draw attention to specific findings in the case of Hong Kong, this study shows those that can emerge in contexts such as Ljubljana. Engagement influences are also specific to the destination context, which were related to historical cultural norms. These further facilitated or hindered suppliers' involvement. These insights improve upon Sun et al. (2022), Ye et al. (2021) and Ivars-Baidal et al. (2017) studies on the factors influencing smart destination engagement.

6.1 Theoretical implications

While previous studies draw attention to the need for collaboration for development of smart destinations, discussions were never positioned and empirically investigated within the long-established research area of tourism/destination collaboration. By engaging within this perspective, this is the study was able to provide a deeper understanding of engagement in smart destinations, which is lacking in empirical insights and theory or conceptual models. Scholars mainly draw on destination competitiveness models, which emphasises the macro-environmental influences. These usually directly affect the destination on a whole and are not the factors that may emerge at the relational level (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2017). This study provides a valuable contribution to smart tourism research by examining the phenomenon through the lens of stakeholder theory, which is recognised in destination collaboration literature. This research shows that influences are not only barriers as seen in prior studies, but facilitators also exist prior and during engagement.

This study extends stakeholder models within destination collaboration research. Previous research on smart tourism applied early versions of stakeholder theory to understand

implementation within individual organisations. However, this has been criticised for not being able to provide specific insights for practitioners. We applied De Wit's relational factors of inter-organisational collaboration, extending the model by identifying the specific components of power, legitimacy and frequency. It also removes urgency as it was not noted as being relevant in the context of this destination collaboration. The study also extends the model by incorporating organisational factors, which are deemed necessary influences of supplier engagement in smart destinations.

This study contributes to the limited theoretical understanding of smart destinations by drawing on stakeholder theory. There is much evidence that points to smart Ljubljana as being a collaboration (Moller et al., 2020). Suppliers prioritise their value and thus pursue networks for their own benefits. They evaluate their engagement in smart initiatives based on their stakeholder relationships that are strong ties. Some suppliers are influenced based on binding contractual agreements. Supplier behaviour must be understood within a historical context. Collaboration and competition are able to co-exist. There are hierarchical controls existing within the network. However, Ljubljana's smart destination attracts multiple, diverse suppliers within and external to the tourism industry thereby resembling an ecosystem. This benefit is not taken advantage of in order to better appeal to suppliers that acknowledge certain resources and expertise as inhibitors to their engagement in the destination's smart initiatives. As a result, the smart destination can be conceptualised as a network within an ecosystem. Its structure is based on an ecosystem but its operation as well as actions of its suppliers are expectations of an inter-firm collaboration.

6.2 Practical implications

There are several practical implications from this research. First, with the subsequent reopening of destinations, there is still a need for further smart initiative implementation. For example, the issue of overcrowding has resurfaced at some attractions (The Guardian, 2021), resembling occurrences before the pandemic (Dodds & Butler, 2019) which had inspired Taleb Rifai, the former secretary-general of the UNWTO, to propose smart initiatives as possible solutions to manage visitor numbers within destinations (UNWTO, 2020). Supplier involvement can further allow practitioners to further differentiate between being a smart city or a smart destination (Johnson & Rickly, 2022).

Second, leaders of smart destination developments such as municipality representatives and destination management organisations should be aware that engagement in smart destinations are not based on macro-environmental factors but organisational and relational influences that affect local tourism businesses. Steps can be taken to conduct briefing sessions where some of the inhibitors are addressed. Details can also be provided of the benefits of the smart destination initiatives. This may cause them to redesign some of the initiatives to increase their attractiveness for suppliers who are needed for bringing these ideas to fruition. Third, destinations that are in the midst of smart development can consider including municipal representatives to further their supplier involvement. This may be more feasible in autocratic societies. However, this move can be extended to more laissez-faire societies to attract multiple diverse stakeholders while bearing in mind the need for incorporating tourism business executives.

Fourth, steps need to be taken to clearly establish the role of the DMO in the smart destination development. This can further empower DMO representatives to ensure two-way, real-time communication with suppliers. This interactive means of communication provides opportunities for suppliers to seek clarity on what is required for participation. For instance, some businesses identified skills and knowledge of staff as being inhibitors, but others did not see this as such. The different views can hamper coordination. Businesses can also speak to DMO representatives regarding anticipated concerns that can cause them to leave the collaboration such as costs for promotion.

Fifth, suppliers tend to collaborate with those who they have frequent interactions with. With this in mind, tourism associations can play a role in advancing smart destination development. These associations are known for attracting, building and maintaining relationships among tourism businesses. Association representatives can provide access to smart developers to different entities that are particularly close-knit to increase engagement. They can also establish resource sharing initiatives or funding schemes for addressing suppliers' lack of resources, which pose as inhibitors of their engagement. Associations can help businesses that lack skills or conviction to collaborate. They can also create events that provide environments for collaborative opportunities.

Sixth, international chains should recognise that local tourism entrepreneurs and executives will need flexibility to act if they are to make adjustments to accommodate the local market. At the same times, suppliers must be mindful that smart destination development is evolving,

therefore, factors may arise that may stop them from engaging during the process and benefiting from being a participant.

6.3 Limitations and future research

There are a number of limitations of the study associated with the theories and methodology, which gives rise to future research. Future studies could expand on this social constructionism perspective in smart tourism to enhance our understanding of these differing viewpoints (Soares et al., 2020). Further research on urgency, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic has called for immediate action from suppliers may well be fruitful. While urgency was incorporated in the original framework of the factors influencing collaboration by De Wit (2017), it was not observed to influence supplier engagement in Ljubljana. Future studies can draw on historical lens to understand stakeholder engagement such as incorporating the concept of time or theories such as path dependence or cultural-historical activity theory (Nicolini et al., 2012). Scholars can apply ecosystem concepts, namely co-evolutionary logic and boundaries, for exploring the structure of smart destinations. They may also consider exploring other similar destination contexts based on the influences that were presented in the findings section of this paper.

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Appendices

Table A.1: Smart Tourism Initiatives in Ljubljana

Smart Tourism Initiative	Details
Green Supply Chains Web Platform	- An initiative connects local food growers to potential buyers via an online platform. The Green Supply Chains web platform was complemented by Taste Ljubljana initiative, which was designed to spread awareness of authentic local food in hotels and restaurants by offering dishes to tourists. This was further promoted on DMO's website.
Ljubljana by wheelchair mobile application	- Mobile application that provides details of wheelchair-accessible locations.
Multisensory museum guided tours	- An initiative that enables interactive tourist experience through technologies that connect with the environment to enable personalised engagement with users of museums.
Mobile audio guides	- Museums with mobile audio guides.
Mobile parking	- Mobile parking application designed to show availability of parking spaces within the city through the integration of sensors.
Digital city guide	- Mobile application that promotes sightseeing routes.
Electric car sharing	- Initiative that enables access to electric cars when not in use. Availability is detected through technologies that sense environment such as cameras and sensors.
Tourist card Urbana	- City card that gives access to attractions as well as show availability of parking spaces and bicycle sharing.

Bike sharing scheme	-	An initiative that enables access to tourists through bicycle sharing, which are accessed within destination at bicycle storage containers that can be located via a mobile application. This application also illustrates the available bicycles and charging stations for electric bikes.

Table A.2: Interview Questions

Theme of Question	**Questions for Participants**
General Details	First, can you introduce yourself? What is your role here and how long have you been affiliated with the business?
General Details	Tell me about your business. Why was it established? What is your vision? Who are your customers? What do you offer?
Influences of Engagement	Why did you become involved in smart tourism? Did your business/ vision coincide with the need to help the destination develop its vision of enhancing experiences and deal with destination management? Did your concern for Ljubljana's growing industry play a role?
Influences of Engagement	Being a part of the tourism industry and smart tourism development in Ljubljana, are there any guidelines you have to abide by? How do you know what they are? How do they work?

Table A.3: Details of Interviews

Business Code	**Type of Establishment**	**Interview Location at Organisation**	**Period of Interview**	**Length of Interview (Minutes)**
S	Accommodation	Restaurant	April 2019	51

S	Accommodation	Outside sitting area	April 2019	56
S	Accommodation	Restaurant	April 2019	45
S	Accommodation	Restaurant	April 2019	45
S	Restaurant	Front of house	April 2019	45
G	Attraction	Lobby	February 2019	30
S	Accommodation	Lobby	April 2019	46
G	Destination marketing and services	Office	April 2019	56
S	Restaurant	Front of house	April 2019	
S	Restaurant	Front of house	February 2019	56
S	Accommodation	Office	February 2019	23
S	Attraction	Office	February 2019	43
S	Tourism consulting services	Office	February 2019	31
S	Accommodation	Lobby	April 2019	53
G	Destination marketing and services	Office	February 2019	40
S	Attraction	Lobby	February 2019	30
G	Destination marketing and services	Meeting room	February 2019	40
S	Restaurant	Front of house	February 2019	32

S	Attraction	Office	February 2019	57
S	Attraction	Office	February 2019	57
S	Transportation service provider	Office	February 2019	20
S	Transportation service provider	Office	February 2019	20
G	Accommodation	Lobby	April 2019	59
S	Attraction	Via telephone	March 2019	20
S	Attraction	Office	March 2019	40
S	Transportation service provider	Office	March 2019	30
S	Attraction	Staff communal area	February 2019	22
S	Accommodation	-	May 2019	-
SEG	Technology company	Via Skype	June 2019	51
EG	Educational institution	Via Skype	June 2019	60
EG	Educational institution	Via Skype	July 2019	66

Table A.4: Codebook

	Code	Full Definition	Content Description
Relational Factors	Power	A relationship among suppliers where one supplier gets another to do something that would not have otherwise been done	Organisational internal and external collaboration
	Legitimacy	Principles set by suppliers, in line with norms, values and beliefs	Rules within the industry like government regulations, tourism development plans and morals in the form of business values and strategies
	Urgency	The degree that suppliers' claims call for immediate attention	Immediate action to solve problems
	Frequency	Rate of active communication and interactions among suppliers and expectation of future interactions	Ongoing communication with suppliers; previous affiliations with suppliers

Number of words exclusive of abstract and references- 8,000