EVALUATION OF SMARTNESS
OF THE TOURISM DESTINATION WEBSITES
OF THE KLAIPEDA REGION

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Abstract. In the context of the smart tourism ecosystem, destination communication websites occupy a pivotal position in the process of selecting destinations and hotels. In the contemporary era, the concept of smart cities, propelled by telecommunications-based information and communication technologies (ICT), is transforming the urban landscape. The concept of a smart city is not merely concerned with operational efficiency; it also seeks to enhance the overall value and quality of life for residents. This is of paramount importance for the sustainable development of urban areas. The tourism sector plays a significant role in this system, particularly due to the impact of sophisticated tourism ecosystems. The websites of local tourist information centres serve as the primary communication platforms for travellers, facilitating their decision-making processes regarding travel destinations and accommodation. This scientific publication assesses the efficacy of the websites of the tourism information centres (TICs) in the Klaipėda region, evaluating them according to criteria including user experience, integration of smart city principles and the provision of value-added services. When evaluating the websites of tourist information centres in the Klaipeda region, the authors tried to determine their smartness in relation to the following parameters 1. informativeness; 2. functionality; 3. innovation; 4. accessibility, supporting the development of regional tourism and its alignment with the broader goals of a smart city. The aim of the study is to propose directions for improvement after analysing the smartness parameters of the websites of the tourism information centres of the Klaipeda region. A review of the study's findings reveals that the informativeness parameter was rated favourably in the Klaipeda region, particularly in relation to the provision of comprehensive information about tourist destinations, accommodation facilities and catering establishments. However, the functionality and innovativeness parameters were identified as the most pressing areas for enhancement. In the functionality parameter, synchronization with weather forecasts and monitoring of tourist data (*traffic dynamics*) received the lowest scores – 3.6 and 3.9 points respectively (*on a 10-point scale*). In the context of innovation, two areas for improvement were identified: the application of virtual reality (VR) (2.4) and the measurement of visitor experience (4.6). In contrast, accessibility, particularly the availability of booking services and tourist information, was rated relatively higher. However, accessibility for people with hearing or visual impairments remains a significant challenge (4.41). Furthermore, it was observed that there is no unified city card system in place for public transport and entry to museums. The findings of the study offer valuable insights into the potential for enhancing the websites of information tourism centres by evaluating them in light of the objectives of smart city and smart tourism.

Keywords: smart tourism, smart tourism destination, innovation.

JEL Classification: M15, M31, L83, O30, O38

1. Introduction

The concept of smartness emerged in the 1990s and has attracted significant attention from the public since that time (Hollands, 2015). The application of smart technologies is increasingly regarded as a promising solution for enhancing the competitiveness of tourism destinations. These include mobile technologies, QR codes, recommendation systems, social media,

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the Internet of Things, big data, artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), blockchain, and so forth. The spread of these technologies has fundamentally changed the way in which the world's cities are built, consumed, and shared experiences between visitors and residents (Hamid et al., 2021; Gretzel & Koo, 2021).

Smart travel websites supported by smart ICT should be able to actively detect the environment, filter relevant information, and learn from processes to provide users with clear and tailored information and services. These sites should actively provide users with personalized information to understand their needs. The transfer of data between interconnected websites facilitates the dissemination of information from one site to another that contains pertinent data. Such a simultaneous change guarantees that the information displayed on smart tourism websites is as accurate and up-to-date as possible.

As posited by F. Femenia-Serra et al. (2022), the discourse of smart tourism is predicated on the assumption that the utilisation of technologies that facilitate interactions between tourism stakeholders and the data obtained from these interactions enables enhanced decision-making processes and more effective management of locations. As posited by Ivars-Baidal (2022), the establishment of a sophisticated tourism system theoretically engenders a greater influx of information, encompassing both quantity and quality. This, in turn, facilitates the monitoring, dissemination, communication and participation processes, as well as transparency in destination management. In addition, new data sources and ICT applications should allow for more efficient use of resources, real-time management, personalization of services, development of an innovation ecosystem, or creation of simulation models for forecasting purposes.

Research problem. What is the situation of tourism information centers in the Klaipeda region in the context of smart tourism? *Research object.* Smartness of tourism information centers websites in the Klaipeda region. The *goal of the study* is to propose directions for improvement based on the analysis of the parameters of smartness of websites of tourist information centers of the Klaipeda region. The *objective of this study* is twofold: firstly, to examine the concept of a smart city; secondly, to conduct an empirical study to determine the extent to which TIC websites in the Klaipeda region can be considered "smart".

Research design. During the research, the web pages of the tourist information centres of Klaipeda region, which consists of 7 municipalities, were evaluated: Klaipeda, Klaipeda district, Palanga, Neringa, Kretinga district, Silute district, Skuodas district.

In evaluating the website smartness of tourism information centres, four categories were distinguished

based on Huang et al. (2017); Zhang et al. (2018); Lee et al. (2018). According to research conducted by Choi et al. (2021):
1. Informativeness.
2. Functionality.
3. Innovativeness.
4. Availability.

The type of quantitative research chosen for the study was the group survey method. The general population consisted of students of the first regular course of the Klaipeda department of the Lithuanian Business College.

In order to ascertain the requisite number of respondents to be interviewed, the Raosoft survey questionnaire calculator was employed (online link: http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html). It was determined that in order to obtain the desired results, a minimum of 33 respondents was necessary, given a confidence level of 97 percent and an acceptable margin of error of 3 percent.

A total of 28 questionnaires were correctly completed, while two were damaged and three were not answered. This results in a response rate of approximately 85% for the study, which is in line with the required sample size.

2. Theoretical Background of the Study

The concept of a smart tourism city is emerging as a means to provide value-added services to tourists in response to the recent rapid growth of smart tourism technologies, including cloud computing, big data, IoT applications, and social networking services (Choi et al., 2021). The implementation of a smart tourism city can enhance the tourist experience by analysing travel patterns and offering personalised attractions, which ultimately leads to an increase in tourist satisfaction.

The concept of smart cities is inextricably linked to smart tourism (Weaver and Moyle, 2019). The scientific literature under review concentrates on the deployment of cutting-edge information and communication technologies to enhance the tourism system. As M. Sigala (2018) observes, smart tourism optimises stakeholder outcomes through the continuous learning and adaptation of both users and service providers.

The concept of smart tourism direction and its characteristics are detailed in Table 1. These can be distinguished into five essential parts: first – Tourism organisations; second – Governments; third – Local Residents-/-Local Communities; fourth – Tourists; fifth – Environment.

The smart development of a tourism destination is therefore highly dependent on the capacity of the destination, the coordination at the destination level and the networking capacity between destinations.

Table 1
Characteristics of smart tourism destinations

STAKEHOLDERS	OUTPUT FEATURES
Tourism organisations	– Performs an intelligent central function that coordinates all relevant information and makes it easy for users to access information in real time; – Digitisation of core business processes; – Optimising energy use; – Collaborating with local communities, tourists and government to co-create the tourism experience; – Ensures organisational flexibility, quick decision-making and the need to respond to customer needs based on timely analysis; – Enables precise targeting and personalised service.
Governments	– Manage information that supports data disclosure; – Organising data confidentiality; – Establishment of public-private partnerships.
Local Residents-/ -Local Communities	– Establishes a permanent connection; – Provides savings and empowerment; – Provides an understanding of technology; – Provides citizen journalism; – Actively participates in the development of smart heritage / e-culture.
Tourists	– Makes them very well connected and informed; – Creates active critics and whispering marketers; – Generates highly personalised demand for services; – Connects both socially and technologically; – Enables dynamic discussion on social media; – Enables co-creation of experiences; – Contributes to content; – Utilises end-user devices in public places.
Environment	– Allows entities to communicate with each other via the Internet; – Availability of cluster information services; – Formation of an innovation ecosystem; – Sensor networks in the environment; – Combine digital information and social context to improve; – Geophysical reality; – Creates interoperable social platforms.

Source: (Buhalis, & Amaranggana, 2013)

Destination development is a complex process. The Internet is a convenient communication platform for the supply and demand of tourism destinations to communicate and exchange information. The Internet has become an invaluable tool for the dissemination of information, low-cost and high-speed communication, and supplier-consumer transactions, and has thus exerted a continuous influence on and transformation of the tourism industry (Zhang et al., 2018). As observed by U. Gretzel and Ch. For Koo (2021), the concept of smart tourism is predicated on the objective of providing support to the tourism industry, with the aim of enhancing the quality of the tourist experience and the standard of service provided (Gretzel & Koo, 2021). In a 2015 study, U. Gretzel and colleagues identified three core elements of smart tourism: smart experience, smart business ecosystem, and smart destination.

One of the most crucial elements of the assessment of the travel feedback process is the tourist's experiences at the destination. These experiences are regarded as intangible, distinctive, enduring and highly personal occurrences that can be interpreted from two perspectives: the actual experience and the evaluated experience (Kim & Chen, 2019). From this perspective, a significant number of researchers concur that the optimal strategy for travel and tourism businesses to ensure their survival and growth is to facilitate and enrich experiences. Consequently, intelligent tourism technologies and innovations have emerged as motivating and necessary forces for tourist destinations and organisations.

As noted by D. Buhalis and A. Amaranggana (2015), tourists share information through real-time communication systems in smart tourism destinations. Smart technology also makes it easier to access and use information. In addition, smart tourism technology enables smart tourism participants to find detailed information. Thus, acquiring, using and sharing tourism-related information while travelling is crucial for smart tourism.

The concept of smart tourism has the potential to optimise the utilisation of tourism resources, facilitate the management of tourism cities, ensure

the maintenance of tourist attractions, enhance the quality of life and communication between tourists and residents (Gretzel, Werthner, Koo, & Lamsfus, 2015). The fundamental concept of smart tourism is the Smart Tourism Ecosystem (STE), which gathers, processes and utilises data related to tourism, offering tourists the optimal value of services and experiences through the application of smart technologies and the sharing and co-creation of a vast amount of information.

On the other hand, the development of smart cities is subject to justified criticism. Its association with neoliberal approaches that promote a technocentric vision of cities, technological bias, privatisation of public services, technological dependency, loss of citizens' privacy or self-serving depoliticisation of urban governance is often criticised (Soares et al., 2022; Femenia-Serra et al., 2022). The debate about smart tourism cities arises from the complexity described by N. Komninos and L. Mora (2018) based on four dichotomies: a technology-driven or holistic strategy; a double or quadruple helix collaboration model; a top-down or bottom-up approach; and a unidimensional or integrated intervention logic. It is therefore incumbent on developers and users of the smart tourism concept to evaluate this before making decisions.

As posited by U. Gretzel and Ch. Koo (2021), the smart tourism city concept offers a malleable framework for urban management, thereby facilitating more efficacious strategies for addressing overtourism concerns. To illustrate, transport accessibility can be modified in real time in response to congestion caused by tourism, and tourists can be distributed more efficiently to urban areas, thereby increasing the value of their tourism. As posited by U. Gretzel and T.B. Jamal (2020), the concept of smart tourism represents an aspirational vision that informs the evolution of tourism in the digital age. It is predicated on the utilisation of technology and data to attain enhanced levels of sustainability, innovation and superior destination management.

The concept of smart tourism is one that is open to a number of different interpretations and lacks a universally accepted definition. This is evidenced by the absence of a definition presented in Table 2.

Elaborating the concept of smart tourism, which firstly includes infrastructure using advanced materials and information systems, and secondly the continuous monitoring of conditions based on the integration of information in all related and unrelated aspects of the infrastructure, creating a tourism product. Other smart city concepts include not only technology but also community and politics as key assets to promote "smartness" in economic, environmental, social and governance areas (Yigitcanlar et al., 2018).

In their 2015 study, V. Albino et al. provide a comprehensive overview of the key dimensions that define smart cities. These include:
– Urban network infrastructure that enables political efficiency and social and cultural development.
– Business-led urban development and creative activities that contribute to the growth of the city.
– Social inclusion and social capital of different city residents in city development.
– Natural environment as a strategic component of the future.

In conclusion, the infrastructure of smart city development exerts an influence on tourism. Given that the tourism sector is subsumed within the service sector, smart tourism cities are, by definition, considered to be smart tourism cities (Um and Chung, 2021).

Table 2
Diversity of smart tourism concepts

AUTHOR, YEAR	CONCEPT
Z. Ling-Yun et al. (2012)	Government reform based on next-generation ICT to realise the overall sustainability of tourism and the sharing of social resources by providing tourists with personalised, high-quality and satisfying services.
D. Buhalis and A. Amaranggana (2015)	Connecting stakeholders through knowledge-intensive communication flows, digitisation of core business processes and mobility of organisational processes.
U. Gretzel et al. (2015)	Tourism supported by an integrated effort to collect and aggregate data at the destination -/- using data from physical infrastructure, social connections, governmental -/- organisational sources and the human body -/- mind, using advanced technology to transform this data into local experiences and business value propositions with a clear focus on efficiency, sustainability and experience enrichment.
Y. Li et al. (2017)	Smart tourism is a ubiquitous travel information service that tourists receive while travelling.
M. Jeong, & H. Hailey Shin (2020)	A smart city is a city that combines local resources with information and communication technologies (i.e., artificial intelligence, cloud computing, augmented reality, Internet of Things, etc.).
P. Lee et al. (2020)	Bringing together the interests of the public and private sectors to serve both tourists and residents.
J. C. Soares et al. (2022)	The impact of information technology on tourism and the various implications for demnd behaviour, new business models, creating new tourist experiences or rethinking destination management.
U. Gretzel (2022)	A type of tourism development that uses modern technologies (such as sensors, wireless systems and big data analytics) to achieve long-term sustainability goals, increase the innovation potential of a destination and provide the highest quality tourism experience.

3. Results

The aim of the research was to determine the smartness of the websites of tourism information centers in the Klaipėda region by evaluating four categories of websites visited by selected tourists (*informativeness, functionality, innovativeness and accessibility*). As illustrated in the diagram below (Figure 1), it can be concluded that all websites exhibit high scores in the category of informativeness. The lowest ratings are in the categories of functionality and innovation. Upon analysis of the results, it becomes evident that there is a consistent evaluation of the four parameters of smartness.

Informativeness is reflected in the graph below (Figure 2), which provides information on places visited by tourists, accommodation and catering establishments, shopping places, tourism products and services. The highest scores are for information on places visited by tourists, followed by information on accommodation and catering establishments. The lowest scores are given to information about shops. The TIC websites of the Palanga and Klaipėda directions are the leaders in this category.

The functionality parameter (Figure 3) reflects the level of synchronisation and connectivity of the websites of tourist destinations with internet search engines, the public transport system and tour operators/travel agents. Another important parameter in this category is the ability to monitor tourism data in real time. Finally, tourist destination websites must include links to real-time weather forecasts. It can be concluded that the websites of tourist
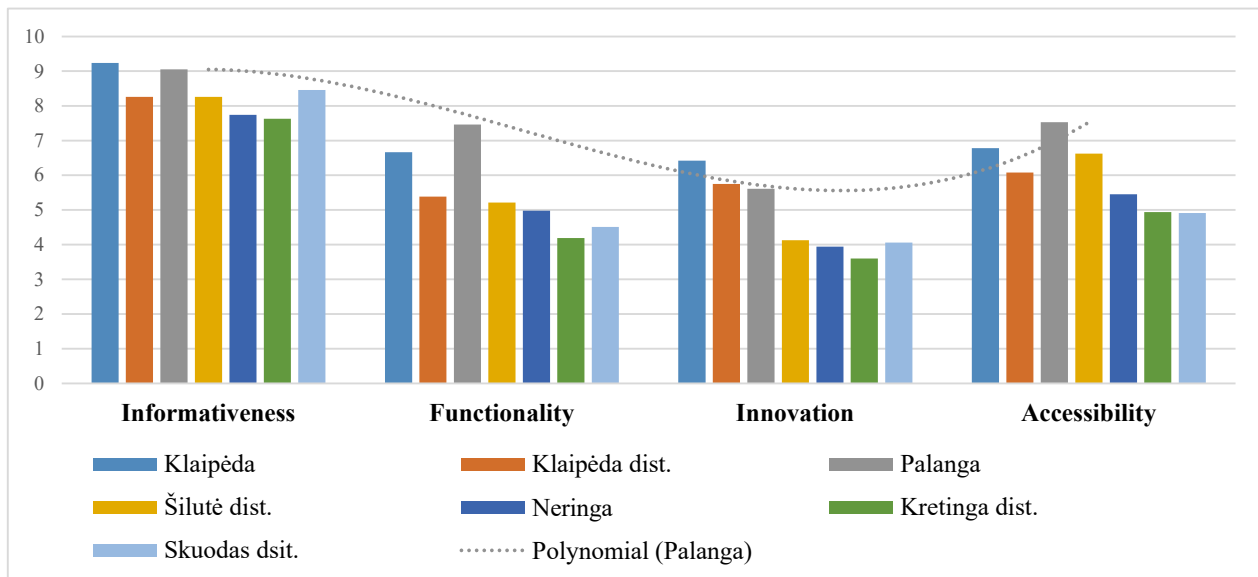

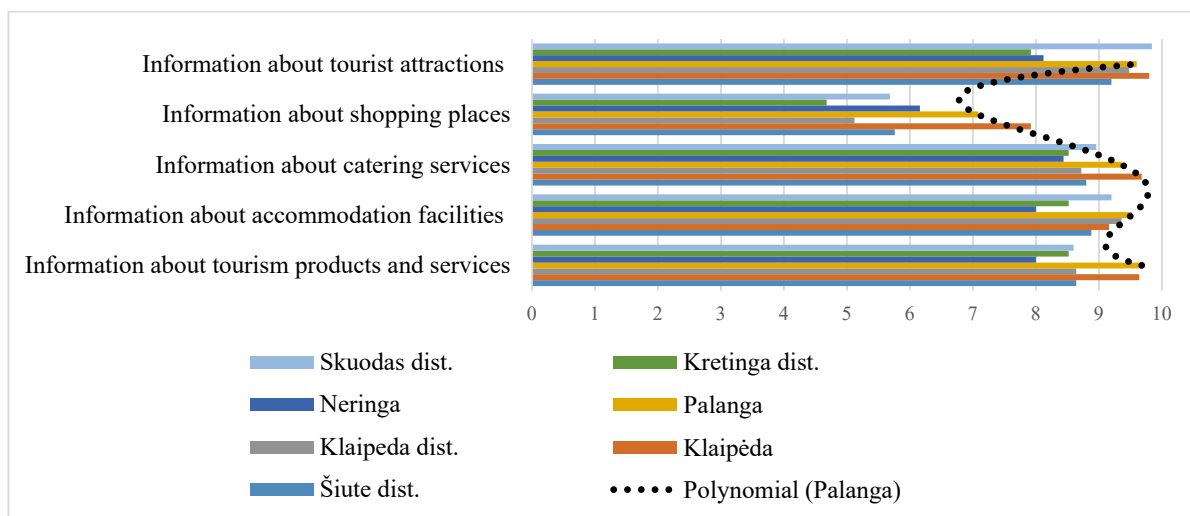**Figure 1. General score of the smartness of the destination websites**

Figure 2. Informativeness parameter

destinations are deficient in terms of functionality, particularly with regard to monitoring tourism data and facilitating connections with the relevant tourist destinations via public transportation. In comparison, the websites of the cities of Palanga and Klaipėda exhibited a somewhat higher level of functionality.

The lowest mean score for all destination websites was observed in the innovation category, which included the use of virtual reality (VR) elements (Figure 4). In conjunction with visitor experience and mobile app measurement, these metrics highlight crucial areas for enhancement. However, the municipalities of the cities of Klaipėda and Palanga have demonstrated leadership in the real-time capacity to receive tourist feedback and to create tourist routes within the aforementioned areas.

The accessibility parameter (Figure 5) reflects the availability levels of various services that can be ordered or accessed directly from the tourist destination website. The availability of information on tourist attractions, including museums, also exhibited variation between the municipalities of Klaipėda and Palanga. The accessibility of tourism products and services was also evaluated with a rating of 9.16 and 8.64 points. The results of the evaluation showed that there is a lack of a unified city card that allows residents and visitors to access public transport and museums. However, the lowest scores were given for the availability of information for people with hearing and visual disabilities, with the exception of Silute District Municipality, which scored 7.52 points and stood out from the other evaluated municipalities in Klaipeda Region.

After analysing the smartness of the Klaipeda region tourism information websites, several essential areas for improvement were identified in the identified parameters (Table 3). These areas are critical gaps that need to be addressed in order to improve the overall
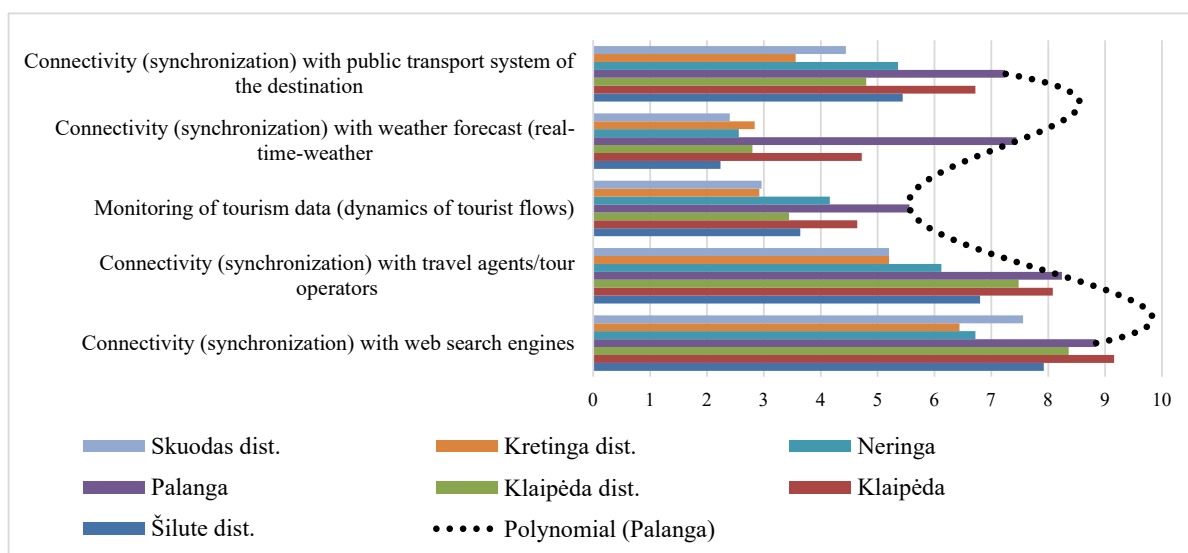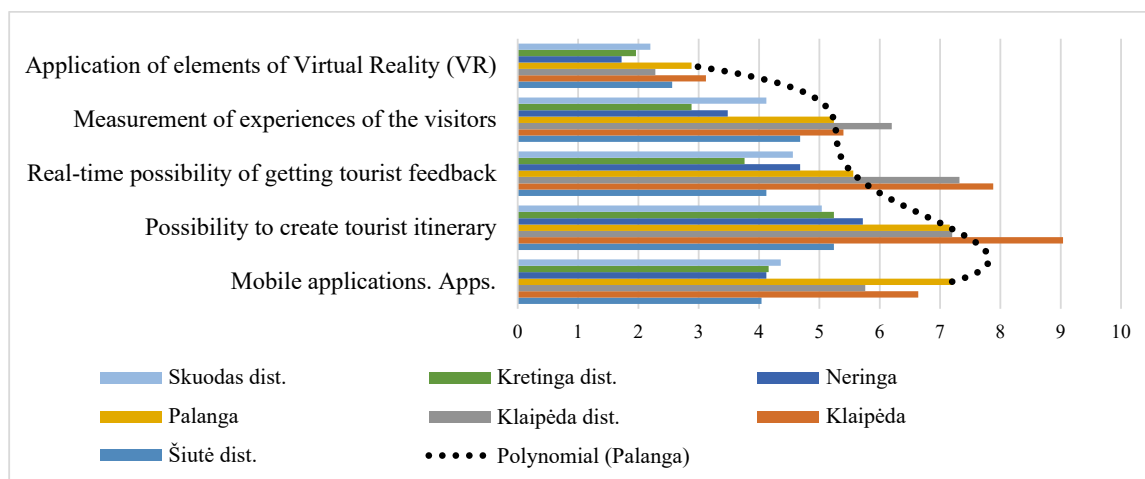

Figure 3. Functionality parameter
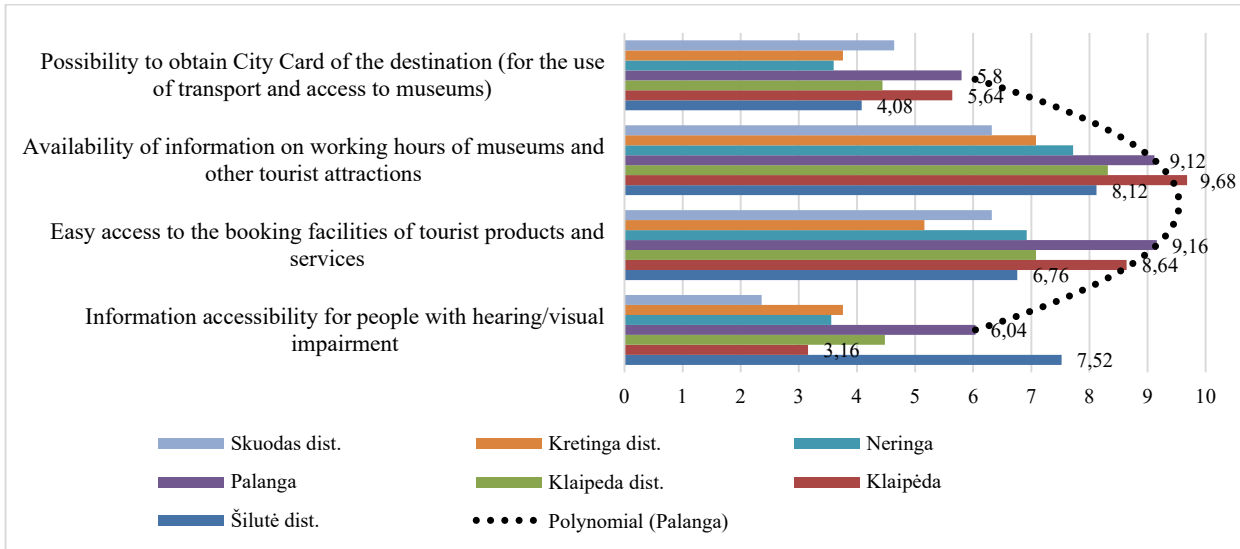

Figure 4. Innovation parameter

Figure 5. Accessibility parametre

functionality and user experience of these platforms, making them more compatible with the principles of smart tourism.

Functionality stands out as a key area that needs attention. Many sites lack synchronisation with basic services such as real-time weather forecasts, public transport systems and tourism data tracking. By improving this integration, visitors could make more informed and seamless travel decisions, improving the overall experience. In addition, real-time monitoring of tourism data such as visitor flows and popular attractions would provide valuable insights for both tourism authorities and travellers.

In the field of innovation, there is a notable absence of the adoption of advanced technologies such as virtual reality (VR). The implementation of VR elements could provide potential visitors with the opportunity to engage with immersive travel destinations, thereby increasing their interest and engagement. Similarly, the development of mobile applications to enhance the tourism experience remains underdeveloped, representing another avenue for innovation. The integration of such technologies could modernise these websites and enhance their status in the competitive domain of smart tourism.

The analysis of the accessibility parameter revealed that the websites also lack accessibility for people with hearing and visual disabilities. In order to advance the cause of inclusion, it is imperative to guarantee that information is accessible to all users, irrespective of their physical capabilities. Furthermore, the lack of a unified city card system represents a significant area for improvement, as it would facilitate seamless access to public transport, museums and other tourist services.

It is of great consequence to enhance these areas in order to transform the tourism websites of the Klaipeda region into intelligent, user-centric platforms that can more effectively address the requirements of contemporary travellers and align with the overarching objectives of a smart city.

4. Generalisation

The concept of smart tourism encompasses two main elements: firstly, an infrastructure based on advanced materials and sophisticated information systems; and secondly, the continuous monitoring and integration of data from both related and unrelated parts of this infrastructure to create a cohesive tourism

Table 3

Key areas for improvement

Informativeness	Functionality	Innovation	Accessibility
Information about shopping places	Synchronisation with weather forecasts	Application of elements of Virtual Reality (VR)	Information accessibility for people with hearing / visual disabilities
	3,6	2,4	4,41
	Monitoring of tourism data (*flow dynamics*)	Measurement of experiences of the visitors	Possibility to obtain City Card
6,05	3,9	4,6	4,57

product. In addition to technological developments, smart city initiatives underscore the significance of community participation and political engagement as pivotal factors in attaining "smartness" in domains such as economic advancement, environmental sustainability, social well-being, and governance.

The survey on the smartness of tourism destination websites showed that: destination websites are more focused on information than on accessibility; synchronisation with public transport is the weakest part of all websites; innovative solutions such as monitoring tourism data, use of VR elements are at a low level; information accessibility for people with hearing/visual disabilities needs to be improved; tourism websites representing Palanga and Klaipeda have the highest ranking.

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