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Designing an Indigenous Smart Tourism Ecosystem Model Based on Digital Content Marketing: A Qualitative Study in the Historic City of Dezful

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Abstract

This study aimed to design an indigenous smart tourism ecosystem model based on digital content marketing in the historic city of Dezful. This qualitative study employed an exploratory and interpretive design using thematic analysis and interpretive structural modeling. The participants consisted of 15 experts selected through purposive and information-oriented sampling from among tourism managers, university faculty members, tourism industry specialists, digital marketing experts, content producers, and social media professionals. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and complementary documentary analysis. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached. Interview transcripts and documentary materials were analyzed using MAXQDA through iterative coding, comparison, categorization, and theme development. The final themes were subsequently structured through interpretive structural modeling, and MICMAC analysis was used to examine the driving and dependence characteristics of the identified components. Qualitative analysis identified nine main themes and 62 subthemes forming the indigenous smart tourism ecosystem. The main themes comprised content creation and sharing, social media marketing, personalized content, tourism content marketing policy, tourism branding, tourism content marketing performance, tourist relationship management, tourist participation, and tourism financial performance. The findings showed that effective smart tourism development in Dezful depends on the interaction of high-quality and localized digital content, multi-platform communication, personalization, strategic governance, destination branding, emerging technologies, continuous tourist relationship management, and active tourist participation. The model further indicated that digital content marketing functions as a connecting mechanism between destination resources, tourism stakeholders, tourists, digital platforms, and economic outcomes. The findings indicate that an indigenous smart tourism ecosystem in Dezful should be developed as an integrated, content-centered, technology-enabled, and locally grounded system in which digital marketing, stakeholder collaboration, tourist engagement, destination identity, and economic development reinforce one another.

Keywords: Smart Tourism Ecosystem, Digital Content Marketing, Indigenous Tourism Model, Smart Tourism, Destination Marketing, Tourist Participation, Dezful

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1. Introduction

Tourism has increasingly evolved from a conventional service-oriented industry into a technology-mediated ecosystem in which destinations, tourists, businesses, local communities, digital platforms, public institutions, and content producers interact through complex networks of information exchange and value creation. The rapid diffusion of digital technologies has transformed the manner in which tourists search for information, compare destinations, construct expectations, make travel decisions, share experiences, and maintain relationships with destinations after travel. At the same time, destination managers and tourism enterprises increasingly rely on digital infrastructures, data analytics, artificial intelligence, social media, mobile technologies, and platform-based communication to improve their competitiveness and responsiveness. This transition has contributed to the emergence of smart tourism as a multidimensional approach that integrates technological capability with destination management, visitor experience, information accessibility, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainable development (Buhalis, 2020; Labudová, 2024). Accordingly, smart tourism should not be understood merely as the adoption of new technologies but as an integrated system through which digital resources are employed to generate more personalized, efficient, interactive, and sustainable tourism experiences.

The concept of smart tourism has developed alongside broader transformations in eTourism and smart cities. Technological advancement has gradually shifted tourism from basic information and communication technologies toward interconnected systems capable of real-time interaction, data-driven decision-making, automation, personalization, and ambient intelligence (Buhalis, 2020). In this context, smart tourism destinations are characterized by their ability to connect technological infrastructures with the needs and behaviors of tourists while simultaneously strengthening destination management and stakeholder coordination. The integration of tourism with smart-city infrastructures further expands the scope of smart tourism by linking mobility, accessibility, cultural resources, digital services, urban governance, sustainability, and visitor experience (Labudová, 2024). Consequently, a smart tourism destination is increasingly viewed as an ecosystem rather than a collection of disconnected technological applications.

The ecosystem perspective is particularly important because tourism value is rarely created by a single actor. Tourism experiences are produced through interactions among accommodation providers, transportation services, tourism attractions, cultural organizations, public agencies, digital intermediaries, tourists, local residents, and communication platforms. Governance within smart tourism destinations therefore depends heavily on collaboration, network relationships, and mechanisms that enable different stakeholders to exchange knowledge and coordinate activities (Errichiello & Micera, 2021). A collaborative network approach can facilitate the integration of technological, organizational, and social resources and can help destinations respond more effectively to changing tourist expectations. From this perspective, smart tourism ecosystems are dynamic structures in which technological innovation and stakeholder cooperation jointly contribute to the production, communication, and delivery of destination value.

Despite the growing importance of smart tourism, the development of such ecosystems remains highly context dependent. Smart tourism models cannot necessarily be transferred unchanged from one destination to another because destinations differ in terms of technological readiness, cultural characteristics, governance arrangements, local economic structures, tourism resources, stakeholder capabilities, and visitor profiles. Qualitative research on smart tourism destinations has shown that the meaning and practical realization of "smartness" may vary considerably across destinations and stakeholders (Gelter et al., 2022). Similarly, research in Iranian tourism contexts has identified the need for localized approaches to smart tourism development that consider destination-specific capacities and constraints (Aslani et al., 2024). Therefore, the design of an indigenous smart tourism ecosystem requires an understanding of the social, cultural, technological, and economic characteristics of the destination rather than simple replication of externally developed frameworks.

Within smart tourism ecosystems, marketing plays a particularly important role because it connects destination resources with potential and actual visitors. The development of digital marketing has fundamentally changed how destinations communicate with tourists and how tourism products are promoted and consumed. Tourism agencies and destination organizations now operate within a digital environment in which websites, search engines, social networks, mobile platforms, online reviews, digital advertising, and multimedia content collectively shape consumer decisions (Cueria, 2022). Digital marketing allows tourism organizations to move beyond traditional mass communication and engage audiences through

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interactive, targeted, and measurable communication strategies. It also provides opportunities for continuous engagement across the different stages of the tourist journey, from inspiration and information search to booking, on-site experience, post-travel sharing, and revisit intention.

Among the different dimensions of digital marketing, content marketing has become especially significant for tourism because tourism products are primarily experiential and cannot be fully evaluated before consumption. Tourists often form expectations through images, stories, videos, reviews, recommendations, virtual experiences, and other forms of digital content. Therefore, content is not simply a promotional supplement but a central mechanism through which destinations communicate identity, stimulate emotions, reduce uncertainty, and influence travel decisions. Content can translate the physical and cultural characteristics of a destination into meaningful narratives that help tourists imagine prospective experiences. In this sense, effective digital content marketing requires not only visibility but also relevance, authenticity, personalization, storytelling, emotional engagement, and consistency across communication channels.

The growing use of artificial intelligence has further expanded the capabilities of tourism content marketing. AI-based technologies can support automated content generation, personalized recommendations, customer segmentation, predictive analytics, conversational systems, sentiment analysis, and real-time communication. These applications are increasingly reshaping tourism marketing and the strategic development of smart destinations (Florido-Benítez, 2024). A systematic review of smart tourism marketing has similarly emphasized the increasing importance of artificial intelligence in destination promotion, tourist behavior analysis, personalization, service delivery, and marketing decision-making (Abbasivarki et al., 2024). These developments indicate that digital content marketing in smart tourism is becoming increasingly data driven and adaptive, allowing destinations to deliver more relevant content to different tourists and to adjust communication strategies according to changing preferences and behavioral patterns.

The role of data is therefore becoming central to tourism marketing. Data-driven marketing models in smart tourism emphasize the use of tourist information, behavioral data, digital interactions, and analytical capabilities to improve targeting, personalization, and decision-making (Khosravi & Naderi, 2023). Rather than distributing identical messages to all users, tourism organizations can use data to identify heterogeneous segments, predict interests, customize recommendations, and improve the timing and format of content delivery. This transformation is especially relevant to smart tourism ecosystems because digital platforms continuously generate information about tourist searches, clicks, comments, reviews, shares, location patterns, and consumption behaviors. When properly managed, these data can support more responsive marketing and contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between digital content and actual travel behavior.

Recent developments in digital transformation have further strengthened the relationship between artificial intelligence, big data, consumer behavior, and sustainable tourism marketing. Digital technologies can help destinations understand tourist preferences while simultaneously improving the efficiency of marketing resources and supporting more sustainable forms of tourism management (Hajiyeva et al., 2026). However, the growing technological sophistication of tourism marketing also creates challenges related to data governance, privacy, transparency, digital inequality, stakeholder capabilities, and the ethical use of automated technologies. Consequently, the development of a smart tourism ecosystem must balance technological innovation with governance mechanisms and locally appropriate marketing policies.

Sustainability is also becoming inseparable from contemporary tourism marketing. Smart tourism development is increasingly expected to contribute not only to economic competitiveness but also to social, environmental, and cultural sustainability. Information technologies can facilitate sustainable destination management by improving resource use, coordination, accessibility, tourist information, and monitoring mechanisms (Shafiee et al., 2018). At the behavioral level, tourism marketing can influence how visitors interact with destinations and whether they adopt environmentally responsible practices. Research on pro-environmental tourist behavior demonstrates that marketing approaches can shape tourists' responses over time and should therefore consider both promotional objectives and sustainability outcomes (Han et al., 2026). Thus, digital content in smart tourism should ideally encourage not only destination consumption but also responsible behavior, respect for local communities, preservation of heritage resources, and sustainable engagement with the destination.

The importance of local identity is particularly pronounced in historical destinations. The competitive advantage of such destinations often depends on their ability to communicate distinctive cultural, architectural, historical, culinary, and social characteristics. Destination branding provides a mechanism through which these elements can be transformed into a

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recognizable and meaningful tourism identity. Studies of urban tourism destination brand equity have shown that destination image, perceived value, awareness, and related branding dimensions can substantially influence the competitive position of cities (Jalalian et al., 2019). In historical destinations, however, branding should not be detached from local narratives. Digital content has the capacity to transform heritage resources into stories that connect visitors emotionally with places, people, traditions, and everyday cultural practices.

Narrative-oriented digital marketing has become particularly important in this regard. Recent research demonstrates how digital narratives and influencer-mediated content can reshape perceptions of local culture and contribute to tourism experiences by turning local practices into shareable and meaningful representations (Wang, 2026). Such findings are highly relevant to destinations with strong cultural and historical identities because digital storytelling can increase visibility while preserving contextual meaning. Content creators, local influencers, residents, businesses, and tourists themselves may collectively participate in the digital representation of a destination. Therefore, destination content is increasingly co-created rather than produced exclusively by official tourism organizations.

Tourist participation has consequently become another defining characteristic of digital tourism ecosystems. Tourists now actively produce reviews, photographs, videos, recommendations, travel stories, and social media posts that influence other users' perceptions and travel choices. Their participation extends the marketing function beyond formal organizations and transforms visitors into co-creators of destination image and brand meaning. At the same time, patterns of tourist purchasing and consumption can be influenced by broader marketing and social mechanisms that shape preferences and decision-making (Lali Sarabi et al., 2026). The incorporation of tourist participation into an indigenous smart tourism ecosystem can therefore strengthen both the informational richness and credibility of destination content.

In Iran, the development of smart tourism has received growing scholarly attention, yet significant implementation challenges remain. Research on Mashhad has shown that the management of smart tourism destinations can face challenges associated with governance, organizational coordination, infrastructure, technology, and management capabilities (Naeim-Abadi et al., 2023). Such challenges suggest that smart tourism cannot be implemented successfully through technology adoption alone. Instead, effective development requires coherent management structures, stakeholder alignment, adequate digital capacities, and strategies responsive to the local tourism environment. Similarly, research conducted in Tabriz has emphasized the importance of developing urban smart tourism through a marketing ecosystem perspective, highlighting the interdependence of actors and marketing-related components (Haqverdi Zadeh et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the need for destination-specific models that integrate tourism management, marketing, digital technology, and stakeholder relationships.

Existing Iranian research has also proposed strategic frameworks for smart tourism development and has emphasized the need to prioritize development factors according to local conditions (Aslani et al., 2024). At the same time, the growing body of research on smart tourism marketing and artificial intelligence indicates that destinations increasingly require models capable of integrating technological capabilities with marketing strategy (Abbasivarki et al., 2024). However, much of the existing literature has focused either on technological dimensions, destination management, marketing strategies, or specific smart tourism applications in isolation. Relatively less attention has been directed toward understanding how digital content marketing can serve as the connective mechanism of an entire smart tourism ecosystem, particularly in historical cities with distinctive indigenous cultural assets.

The need for such an integrated perspective is especially evident in the case of Dezful. As a historical city with considerable cultural, architectural, natural, and heritage potential, Dezful possesses tourism resources that can support differentiated destination positioning. Nevertheless, the existence of attractions alone does not guarantee destination competitiveness. The value of tourism resources increasingly depends on how effectively they are represented, interpreted, communicated, and integrated into tourists' digital decision-making processes. A fragmented digital presence may prevent potential visitors from forming a coherent image of the destination, whereas coordinated content strategies can connect historical attractions, local experiences, cultural narratives, tourism businesses, community actors, and digital platforms within a unified destination ecosystem.

Digital content marketing may therefore provide a strategic foundation for transforming Dezful's tourism resources into an integrated smart tourism experience. Search-engine-friendly content can increase destination discoverability; rich multimedia

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narratives can enhance awareness and emotional engagement; personalized content can improve relevance; social media platforms can facilitate interaction and sharing; influencer partnerships can expand audience reach; tourist-generated content can strengthen authenticity; and data-driven analysis can support continuous improvement. At the same time, these activities require effective governance, destination branding, stakeholder cooperation, technological infrastructure, ethical standards, and mechanisms for tourist relationship management. The ecosystem perspective allows these elements to be examined as interdependent components rather than isolated marketing activities.

There is also a managerial rationale for developing such a model. Tourism marketing models should ultimately contribute to measurable outcomes such as visitor conversion, tourist retention, trust, engagement, destination competitiveness, local economic growth, employment, and revenue generation. Marketing model development in other fields has demonstrated the value of identifying interconnected strategic dimensions and translating them into coherent conceptual frameworks (Bastami et al., 2023). In tourism, however, such models require additional sensitivity to place identity, stakeholder diversity, technological change, visitor participation, and sustainability. An indigenous model can provide a more realistic representation of how these elements interact within the specific cultural and institutional environment of a destination.

Despite advances in smart tourism, digital marketing, data-driven tourism, artificial intelligence, destination branding, and collaborative governance, a conceptual gap remains regarding how these dimensions can be integrated around digital content marketing in the context of an indigenous historical destination. Existing research supports the significance of smart destination governance (Errichiello & Micera, 2021), context-sensitive understandings of smart tourism (Gelter et al., 2022), data-driven marketing (Khosravi & Naderi, 2023), digital transformation (Hajiyeva et al., 2026), artificial intelligence in tourism marketing (Florido-Benítez, 2024), and sustainable tourism development (Shafiee et al., 2018), yet these streams need to be synthesized into an ecosystem model capable of explaining how content-related strategies, stakeholders, technologies, branding, tourist relationships, participation, and economic outcomes interact within a locally grounded destination system.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to design an indigenous smart tourism ecosystem model based on digital content marketing in the historic city of Dezful.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study adopted a qualitative research design with an exploratory and interpretive orientation to develop an indigenous smart tourism ecosystem model based on digital content marketing in the historic city of Dezful. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation involves a complex interaction among tourism stakeholders, digital technologies, local cultural and historical resources, content-production practices, visitor experiences, and destination-marketing processes that cannot be adequately understood through predetermined variables alone. The study was therefore designed to obtain an in-depth understanding of how experts and practitioners conceptualize the components, mechanisms, contextual conditions, and relationships that shape a locally embedded smart tourism ecosystem. The research primarily employed thematic analysis to identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning in participants' experiences and professional perspectives. Thematic analysis provided a systematic yet flexible framework for examining textual data, identifying relevant concepts, organizing them into coherent categories, and ultimately developing higher-order themes capable of explaining the structure of the proposed model. The study followed an inductive logic in which the conceptual structure emerged progressively from the empirical material rather than being imposed on the data in advance.

The study population consisted of individuals with specialized knowledge or practical experience relevant to tourism, digital content marketing, smart tourism, destination management, social media, digital communication, cultural heritage, and tourism-related entrepreneurship. Participants included tourism managers, university faculty members in tourism and digital marketing, tourism industry experts, digital content specialists, social media professionals, destination-marketing practitioners, and individuals with direct experience in tourism businesses and digital tourism promotion. Particular attention was given to experts familiar with the tourism capacities and cultural-historical characteristics of Dezful because the study sought to develop an indigenous model rather than reproduce a generic framework derived from other tourism destinations. Participants were therefore expected to possess sufficient familiarity with the local tourism environment, the digital promotion of destinations, content-based audience engagement, or the management of tourism-related businesses and services.

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Participants were recruited through non-probability purposive and information-oriented sampling. Selection was based on the potential of each participant to provide rich, relevant, and experience-based information concerning the research problem. Expertise, professional experience, familiarity with tourism or digital content practices, involvement in tourism-related decision-making or business activities, and the ability to provide informed reflections on the opportunities and limitations of smart tourism in Dezful were considered during participant selection. The sampling process was iterative and was closely connected to the ongoing analysis. Interviews were analyzed progressively so that emerging concepts, incomplete categories, and areas requiring further clarification could inform subsequent interviews. Data collection continued until theoretical and thematic saturation was achieved, meaning that additional interviews no longer generated substantively new concepts or themes relevant to the developing model. Based on this process, 15 qualified experts participated in the study.

The empirical scope of the study was centered on Dezful as a historically and culturally significant tourism destination with distinctive architectural, cultural, natural, and heritage resources. The local context was considered an integral element of the study rather than merely the geographical location of data collection. Consequently, participants' interpretations were examined in relation to the indigenous characteristics of Dezful, including its historical identity, cultural narratives, heritage attractions, local businesses, destination image, tourism infrastructure, digital presence, and opportunities for the integration of smart technologies into tourism experiences. This contextual orientation made it possible to investigate how digital content marketing could function as an organizing mechanism connecting tourists, local businesses, tourism institutions, cultural resources, digital platforms, content creators, and technological infrastructures within an integrated smart tourism ecosystem.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured in-depth interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviewing was selected because it provided sufficient consistency across interviews while allowing participants to explain their experiences, perceptions, and professional judgments in depth. An interview guide was developed around the main purpose of the research and was designed to explore participants' understanding of smart tourism ecosystems, the current conditions of tourism in Dezful, the role of digital content in destination development, mechanisms of tourist engagement, technological opportunities, stakeholder relationships, indigenous cultural content, content personalization, digital storytelling, social media, user-generated content, online tourism platforms, local tourism entrepreneurship, and the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating these dimensions. The interview questions were primarily open-ended, allowing participants to introduce issues that had not been anticipated at the outset of the research. Probing questions were used whenever necessary to clarify statements, obtain concrete examples, explore the reasoning underlying participants' perspectives, and deepen the interpretation of emerging concepts.

The interview protocol was flexible and evolved during the research process. Insights generated from earlier interviews were incorporated into subsequent interviews when additional exploration was necessary. This iterative procedure allowed the researcher to examine emerging concepts more deeply and to compare interpretations across participants with different areas of expertise. Interviews focused not merely on identifying isolated factors but on understanding how different actors, resources, digital practices, technologies, and forms of content interact within the tourism system. Participants were also encouraged to discuss practical experiences with destination branding, online tourism promotion, digital storytelling, social media engagement, content localization, collaboration with content creators and influencers, tourist-generated content, digital platforms, and emerging technologies relevant to tourism experiences.

Documentary data were used as a complementary source of evidence and to enrich the interpretation of the interview material. Relevant academic publications, tourism reports, strategic documents, destination materials, tourism guides, online content associated with Dezful, examples of digital tourism campaigns, tourism websites, social media content, and documented cases of successful content-marketing practices were reviewed where relevant to the research questions. Particular attention was given to materials capable of clarifying how tourism destinations employ digital narratives, interactive media, user-generated content, platform-based communication, emerging technologies, and culturally localized content to enhance destination visibility and visitor engagement. Documentary evidence was not treated as a substitute for participants' experiences but as an additional source through which emerging interpretations could be compared, contextualized, and refined.

Interview data were documented systematically and prepared for analysis through transcription and repeated review. Field notes were also maintained during and immediately after the interviews to record contextual observations, interpretive ideas, emerging conceptual relationships, and issues requiring further investigation. Data management was conducted in a manner that enabled systematic comparison across interviews and documentary sources. To strengthen the credibility of the qualitative

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evidence, data-source triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from experts with relevant documentary and digital materials. Expert review and interpretive checking were also incorporated into the research process to examine the appropriateness of emerging themes, their conceptual meanings, and their correspondence with the professional realities of tourism and digital content marketing.

The qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis using MAXQDA software. Analysis began concurrently with data collection and proceeded iteratively throughout the study. The first stage involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, field notes, and relevant documentary materials. During this stage, preliminary ideas, recurring expressions, significant experiences, and potentially meaningful concepts were recorded. The researcher subsequently conducted systematic initial coding by identifying segments of data relevant to the research objectives. Coding remained primarily inductive so that concepts could emerge from participants' accounts rather than being restricted to a predetermined conceptual framework. Similar statements were compared continuously, while conceptually distinct statements were retained separately until their analytical significance became clearer.

Following initial coding, related codes were compared and clustered according to conceptual similarity and shared meaning. Through this process, lower-level codes were progressively organized into more coherent subthemes. Constant comparison was used to examine similarities, differences, overlaps, and relationships among codes derived from different participants and documentary sources. The researcher repeatedly moved between individual coded segments and the complete dataset to ensure that emerging themes remained grounded in the empirical material. Particular consideration was given to concepts related to the technological, cultural, communicational, organizational, marketing, experiential, and stakeholder dimensions of the smart tourism ecosystem. The analysis also examined issues such as localized digital storytelling, personalization of tourism content, digital interaction with visitors, tourism-platform capabilities, smart technologies, participation of local businesses, collaboration among tourism stakeholders, social media engagement, user-generated content, destination identity, and the representation of Dezful's historical and cultural resources.

In the subsequent stage, preliminary themes were reviewed, refined, combined, separated, or redefined according to their internal coherence and conceptual distinctiveness. Each emerging theme was examined in relation to both its constituent codes and the overall dataset. Themes that lacked sufficient empirical support were reconsidered, while closely related themes were merged when they represented the same underlying conceptual domain. The resulting thematic structure was progressively organized into basic, organizing, and overarching themes to provide a coherent explanation of the indigenous smart tourism ecosystem. Theme definition and naming were undertaken only after the conceptual boundaries of each theme had become sufficiently clear. This procedure enabled the analysis to move beyond descriptive categorization toward an interpretive understanding of the mechanisms through which digital content marketing can contribute to the formation and operation of a smart tourism ecosystem in Dezful.

After the main themes had been identified, Interpretive Structural Modeling was used as a qualitative structuring technique to clarify the relationships and hierarchical positioning of the principal components emerging from thematic analysis. The final themes identified through the qualitative coding process constituted the conceptual elements considered during this stage. Expert judgments were used to determine whether meaningful directional or interactive relationships existed among the identified components. These judgments were organized into a structural self-interaction matrix and subsequently examined to establish the reachability relationships among the elements. Through iterative level partitioning, the components were arranged according to their relative position within the emerging system, making it possible to distinguish foundational drivers from intermediate mechanisms and more dependent outcomes. The purpose of this procedure was not statistical hypothesis testing, but rather the systematic interpretation and structuring of expert knowledge concerning how the principal elements of the proposed ecosystem influence and interact with one another.

MICMAC analysis was additionally used as a structural interpretive aid to examine the driving and dependence characteristics of the identified components. This procedure supported the interpretation of the model by distinguishing elements with relatively strong driving roles from those that were primarily dependent on other components, as well as identifying elements characterized by substantial mutual interaction. The results of thematic analysis and structural interpretation were then integrated to construct the final indigenous smart tourism ecosystem model. In this model-building process, thematic analysis established the substantive components and meanings of the ecosystem, while interpretive structural analysis clarified how those components were interconnected and hierarchically organized. The final conceptualization

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therefore reflected both the lived and professional perspectives of the participating experts and the specific cultural, technological, marketing, and tourism conditions of the historic city of Dezful.

Several procedures were incorporated to enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis. Credibility was strengthened through purposive recruitment of knowledgeable participants, continuation of interviewing until thematic saturation, triangulation between interviews and documentary evidence, repeated engagement with the data, and expert review of emerging interpretations. Interpretive consistency was supported through systematic documentation of coding decisions and continuous comparison between raw data, codes, subthemes, and overarching themes. Expert feedback was used to evaluate whether the identified themes appropriately represented the phenomenon under investigation and whether their definitions and relationships were conceptually meaningful. Where disagreements or ambiguities emerged, the relevant codes and source material were revisited and theme definitions were refined. An audit trail of analytical decisions, coding revisions, theme development, and model construction was maintained throughout the research process. Together, these procedures were intended to establish a transparent and defensible qualitative pathway from the original interview and documentary data to the final indigenous smart tourism ecosystem model based on digital content marketing.

3. Findings and Results

The qualitative phase included 15 experts and professionals with relevant experience in tourism, digital marketing, content production, and related fields. In terms of gender, 10 participants were men (67%) and 5 were women (33%). Regarding age, 1 participant (7%) was younger than 40 years, 8 participants (53%) were between 40 and 50 years old, and 6 participants (40%) were 50 years of age or older. With respect to educational attainment, 2 participants (13%) held a master's degree and 13 participants (87%) held a doctoral degree. In terms of professional experience, 3 participants (20%) had less than 10 years of work experience, 7 participants (47%) had between 10 and 20 years of experience, and 5 participants (33%) had more than 20 years of professional experience. Overall, the composition of the participants reflected a highly educated and professionally experienced expert group, providing an appropriate knowledge base for the qualitative identification and interpretation of the components of an indigenous smart tourism ecosystem based on digital content marketing in Dezful.

Table 1. Main Themes and Subthemes Identified Through Qualitative Analysis

Main Theme	Subtheme	Interview	Documentary Source
Content Creation and Sharing	SEO-friendly content production	✓	
	Production of rich and valuable content about tourism destinations	✓	✓
	Production of short, concise, and useful content for tourists	✓	✓
	Production of content that creates emotion and experience for tourists	✓	✓
	Production of up-to-date and standardized content for tourists	✓	✓
	Innovation in producing attractive tourism content	✓	✓
	Use of different social media channels for tourism content production	✓	✓
Social Media Marketing	Use of different platforms in tourism marketing	✓	✓
	Production of tourism content across different social media platforms	✓	✓
	Use of influential figures and influencers	✓	
	Enabling content sharing on social media	✓	
	Responding to tourists' comments on social media	✓	✓
	Creating dedicated channels and social networks	✓	
	Providing targeted advertisements to tourists	✓	✓
	Evaluating and measuring social media performance	✓	
Personalized Content	Identifying tourists' personal needs and preferences	✓	✓
	Providing special services according to tourists' demographic characteristics	✓	
	Using data collected from tourists' previous interactions	✓	✓
	Producing content based on tourists' feedback	✓	
	Providing specific recommendations and customized content	✓	
	Establishing personalized communication with key tourists	✓	✓
Tourism Content Marketing Policy	Support of tourism managers for content marketing	✓	

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	Developing long-term visions for content marketing in tourism	✓	✓
	Observing ethical principles and transparency	✓	
	Establishing long-term and short-term content marketing objectives	✓	
	Developing implementation policies for producing and sharing tourism content	✓	
	Allocating sufficient budgets and resources to tourism content marketing	✓	✓
	Data analysis and continuous performance improvement	✓	
	Using digital marketing strategies	✓	✓
Tourism Branding	Creating a tourism destination brand identity	✓	
	Developing tourism experiences	✓	
	Storytelling	✓	
	Collaboration with other active brands, such as airlines or tourism companies	✓	
	Attention to sustainability and social responsibility	✓	
	Continuous analysis of the target market	✓	
	Differentiation and competitiveness	✓	
	Support and provision of specialized services	✓	
	Surveys and assessment of tourist satisfaction	✓	✓
Tourism Content Marketing Performance	Increasing the conversion rate of visitors into actual tourists	✓	
	Increasing tourist retention	✓	✓
	Building trust and credibility	✓	✓
	Increasing content likes and popularity	✓	
	Increasing the sharing of generated content	✓	✓
	Increasing the number of comments on generated content	✓	
	Increasing word-of-mouth tourism marketing	✓	✓
	Increasing the number of social media followers	✓	✓
Tourist Relationship Management	Personalized travel	✓	
	Providing travel guides and travel advice	✓	✓
	Responding to tourists' needs and questions	✓	✓
	Managing tourist data and information	✓	✓
	Managing communication with tourists	✓	✓
	Using emerging technologies in the tourism industry	✓	✓
	Improving service quality and tourist experience	✓	✓
Tourist Participation	Social and cultural participation and influence on host communities	✓	✓
	Environmental participation and sustainable tourism	✓	✓
	Participation in experiences and interaction with attractions	✓	✓
	Participation in infrastructure improvement	✓	
	Participation in creating and strengthening the destination brand	✓	
Tourism Financial Performance	Achieving competitive advantage in the industry	✓	
	Economic growth of the host community	✓	✓
	Employment creation and reduction of unemployment	✓	✓
	National revenue generation and profitability	✓	✓

The qualitative analysis resulted in nine main themes and 62 subthemes that collectively explained the structure of an indigenous smart tourism ecosystem based on digital content marketing. The findings indicated that the proposed ecosystem is not limited to content production as an isolated marketing activity. Rather, it is formed through the interaction of content creation and sharing, social media marketing, personalized content, tourism content marketing policy, destination branding, marketing performance, tourist relationship management, tourist participation, and tourism financial performance. These themes collectively describe a multidimensional ecosystem in which content functions as a connecting mechanism among tourists, tourism businesses, digital platforms, destination managers, local communities, and technological infrastructures.

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The first major theme, content creation and sharing, reflected the foundational role of high-quality digital content in shaping tourists' perceptions and interactions with the destination. Participants emphasized that tourism content should be optimized for search engines, informative, concise, current, standardized, and sufficiently rich to provide meaningful information about the destination. At the same time, purely informational content was considered insufficient. Effective content was expected to create emotions, imagination, and a sense of anticipated experience among potential tourists. Innovation in content creation and the use of multiple social media channels were also identified as important components, indicating that tourism content must be adaptable to different digital formats and audience consumption patterns.

Social media marketing emerged as another central theme. The findings showed that tourism marketing within a smart ecosystem requires the coordinated use of several digital platforms rather than reliance on a single communication channel. Participants highlighted the importance of producing platform-specific tourism content, using influencers and other trusted opinion leaders, facilitating content sharing, responding to comments, and developing dedicated social media channels. Targeted advertising was also recognized as an important mechanism for reaching specific tourist segments. Furthermore, the evaluation of social media performance was identified as a necessary component because smart tourism marketing requires continuous monitoring of digital interactions and adjustment of content strategies based on observed audience responses.

Personalized content constituted a distinct theme and demonstrated the importance of adapting digital communication to individual tourist characteristics. The qualitative data indicated that personalization begins with understanding tourists' needs, interests, preferences, and demographic characteristics. Participants also emphasized the value of using information derived from previous interactions and tourists' feedback to improve subsequent communication. Customized recommendations, individually relevant content, and personalized communication with strategically important tourists were therefore interpreted as mechanisms through which tourism organizations can increase the relevance of digital content and strengthen the perceived value of the destination experience.

The theme of tourism content marketing policy reflected the organizational and managerial conditions required for the effective implementation of digital content strategies. Participants identified managerial support, long-term vision, ethical principles, transparency, clearly defined objectives, implementation guidelines, adequate budget allocation, continuous performance improvement, and the application of digital marketing strategies as essential components. These findings suggest that successful tourism content marketing depends not only on operational content-production capabilities but also on institutional commitment and strategic governance. In the context of Dezful, the development of an indigenous smart tourism ecosystem therefore requires coordinated policies capable of linking tourism promotion, technological development, local identity, and stakeholder participation.

Tourism branding was identified as a major theme linking content marketing with the broader identity of the destination. The findings indicated that creating a recognizable destination identity requires the development of meaningful tourism experiences, storytelling, collaboration with other tourism-related brands, attention to sustainability and social responsibility, continuous market analysis, and differentiation from competing destinations. Storytelling was particularly important because historical and cultural destinations such as Dezful can transform architectural, cultural, and local heritage resources into memorable digital narratives. The findings therefore suggest that destination branding should move beyond visual identity and advertising and instead be rooted in authentic experiences, local narratives, and consistent interaction with tourists.

The theme of tourism content marketing performance represented the observable outcomes of successful digital content activities. According to the participants, effective content marketing should contribute to the conversion of online visitors into actual tourists, improve tourist retention, strengthen trust and credibility, increase engagement with digital content, encourage content sharing and commenting, stimulate word-of-mouth communication, and expand social media audiences. These indicators demonstrate that the performance of content marketing should be assessed in terms of both behavioral outcomes and digital engagement. The findings further imply that content performance is closely related to the extent to which digital communication creates trust, motivates interaction, and supports actual travel decisions.

Tourist relationship management emerged as an important relational dimension of the smart tourism ecosystem. The findings emphasized personalized travel experiences, the provision of travel guidance, timely responses to tourists' questions, systematic management of tourist information, and continuous communication before, during, and after travel. The use of emerging technologies was also identified as an important facilitator of these processes. Participants considered technology valuable when it contributes to service quality and improves the overall tourist experience rather than functioning merely as a

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technological novelty. Thus, smart tourism was interpreted as an experience-centered system in which technology supports more responsive, informed, and personalized relationships with tourists.

Tourist participation represented another key theme and reflected the transition of tourists from passive recipients of services to active participants in the destination ecosystem. Participants highlighted tourists' social and cultural interaction with host communities, participation in environmentally responsible tourism, engagement with attractions and experiences, contributions to infrastructure improvement, and involvement in creating and strengthening the destination brand. This theme indicates that tourists can contribute directly to the social, cultural, environmental, and reputational development of a destination. Their participation can also generate content, feedback, recommendations, and shared experiences that become new inputs into the digital marketing ecosystem.

Finally, tourism financial performance reflected the broader economic outcomes expected from the integrated functioning of the identified themes. The participants associated an effective smart tourism ecosystem with stronger competitive advantage, economic growth in the host community, employment creation, reduced unemployment, and increased tourism-related revenues and profitability. These findings show that digital content marketing was not perceived merely as a promotional activity, but as a strategic mechanism capable of producing wider economic consequences when it is integrated with destination management, stakeholder cooperation, tourist engagement, and local development. Overall, the qualitative findings demonstrate that the proposed ecosystem is structured as an interconnected system in which strategic content production, technological capabilities, personalized communication, destination branding, tourist relationships, participation, and financial outcomes mutually reinforce one another.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to design an indigenous smart tourism ecosystem model based on digital content marketing in the historic city of Dezful. The qualitative findings yielded nine interconnected main themes: content creation and sharing, social media marketing, personalized content, tourism content marketing policy, tourism branding, tourism content marketing performance, tourist relationship management, tourist participation, and tourism financial performance. Taken together, these themes indicate that smart tourism in a historical destination should not be conceptualized merely as the adoption of advanced technologies or the digitization of promotional activities. Rather, it should be understood as an ecosystem in which technological capabilities, content strategies, stakeholder relationships, tourist experiences, local identity, and economic outcomes are systematically interconnected. This interpretation is consistent with the broader evolution of tourism from eTourism toward smart tourism and more integrated forms of destination intelligence, where technology supports interconnected, responsive, and experience-oriented destination systems (Buhalis, 2020; Labudová, 2024).

One of the most prominent findings concerned the central role of content creation and sharing. Participants emphasized SEO-friendly content, rich and valuable destination information, concise and useful communication, emotionally engaging content, up-to-date information, innovation, and the use of multiple social media channels. This result suggests that digital content should perform several functions simultaneously: improving discoverability, reducing information uncertainty, stimulating emotional engagement, and strengthening the perceived attractiveness of the destination. This finding is aligned with research showing that contemporary digital tourism marketing increasingly depends on content that is timely, visible, platform-compatible, and capable of supporting decision-making across different stages of the tourist journey (Cueria, 2022). It also supports the argument that technological advancement in tourism is meaningful only when digital infrastructures are translated into improved information flows and enhanced tourist experiences (Buhalis, 2020). In the context of Dezful, this means that the digital presentation of historical architecture, cultural heritage, local traditions, natural attractions, and urban identity should be transformed into content that is both functionally informative and experientially evocative.

The importance of emotionally engaging and narrative-based content also corresponds with recent work on digital narratives in tourism. Wang showed that digital food narratives and local influencer-mediated communication can reshape the representation of local culture and increase the experiential and symbolic value of destinations (Wang, 2026). This is especially relevant for historical cities such as Dezful, where the tourism product is strongly embedded in place-based narratives. The findings therefore suggest that digital storytelling can function as a mechanism for converting local history, architecture, lifestyle, cuisine, and cultural memory into meaningful tourism experiences. Rather than presenting attractions as isolated

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objects, content can connect them through narratives that help tourists imagine a coherent destination experience. This strengthens the argument that content marketing should be regarded as a strategic component of destination identity rather than as an auxiliary promotional activity.

The second major theme, social media marketing, further highlights the platform-based nature of the proposed ecosystem. The findings emphasized the use of multiple platforms, production of platform-specific content, influencer collaboration, content sharing, response to comments, targeted advertising, dedicated channels, and performance evaluation. These results are consistent with the growing role of digital platforms in tourism marketing, where communication is interactive rather than one-directional and where tourists increasingly expect immediate engagement from destinations and service providers (Cueria, 2022). They also align with evidence that artificial intelligence and advanced digital marketing tools are increasingly being used to optimize targeting, engagement, and customer interaction in smart tourism destinations (Abbasivarki et al., 2024; Florido-Benítez, 2024). The use of targeted advertising and performance measurement in particular demonstrates that social media marketing within a smart tourism ecosystem should be data-informed and adaptive.

The theme of personalized content reinforces this interpretation. Participants emphasized identifying individual tourist needs, using demographic characteristics, drawing on prior interaction data, responding to feedback, offering customized recommendations, and maintaining personal communication with key tourists. These findings support the growing shift from mass tourism promotion toward personalized and data-driven marketing. Khosravi and Naderi argued that smart tourism marketing increasingly depends on the collection and interpretation of data in order to generate more relevant and responsive marketing strategies (Khosravi & Naderi, 2023). Similarly, digital transformation through artificial intelligence and big data has been shown to influence consumer behavior and support more precise forms of sustainable tourism marketing (Hajiyeva et al., 2026). The present findings therefore indicate that personalization should be considered a core mechanism of smart tourism rather than a peripheral service feature. In practical terms, tourists should receive different content and recommendations based on their interests, travel histories, demographic profiles, and prior interactions.

Another important theme was tourism content marketing policy. This theme included managerial support, long-term vision, ethical principles, short- and long-term goal setting, implementation policies, budget allocation, continuous improvement, and digital marketing strategies. The emergence of this theme shows that effective content marketing cannot be sustained through informal or fragmented activities. Instead, it requires institutional support, resource allocation, clear governance, and strategic coordination. This finding aligns with the collaborative governance perspective in smart tourism destinations, which emphasizes that technological and marketing innovations are dependent on effective coordination across destination stakeholders (Errichiello & Micera, 2021). It also resonates with research on smart tourism development in Iran, where managerial, infrastructural, and governance challenges have been identified as important barriers to the effective development of smart destinations (Naeim-Abadi et al., 2023). Therefore, content marketing in Dezful should be integrated into destination-level planning rather than being left to uncoordinated individual actors.

The results concerning policy and governance are also consistent with the marketing ecosystem perspective proposed in the context of urban smart tourism. Haqverdi Zadeh et al. emphasized the importance of interconnected actors and marketing components in developing smart tourism systems (Haqverdi Zadeh et al., 2023). Similarly, strategic development research has shown that smart tourism requires the prioritization and coordination of multiple factors rather than reliance on a single technological intervention (Aslani et al., 2024). The present study extends these insights by positioning digital content marketing as a central organizing mechanism through which destination governance, technological tools, stakeholder relationships, and tourist interaction can be integrated within a local ecosystem.

Tourism branding emerged as another major dimension of the model. The findings emphasized destination identity, tourism experiences, storytelling, partnerships with other brands, sustainability, target-market analysis, differentiation, specialized services, and tourist satisfaction. This suggests that branding within a smart tourism ecosystem is not limited to visual identity or promotional slogans; rather, it is constructed through the totality of the tourist experience and the consistency of the destination's digital and physical representations. This interpretation is consistent with research on urban tourism destination brand equity, where destination image, perceived value, and awareness contribute to stronger positioning and competitiveness

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(Jalalian et al., 2019). For Dezful, digital content can play a particularly significant role in making the city's historical and cultural identity more visible and distinctive in a crowded destination marketplace.

The sustainability-related elements identified under tourism branding are also noteworthy. Participants emphasized sustainability and social responsibility as relevant branding components, suggesting that destination competitiveness should be associated with responsible tourism development. This aligns with the view that information technology and smart tourism can contribute to sustainable destination development through improved management, accessibility, and coordination (Shafiee et al., 2018). It is also consistent with recent evidence indicating that tourism marketing can influence tourists' pro-environmental behavior over time (Han et al., 2026). Consequently, content marketing in a historical city should not only encourage visitation but also communicate responsible behavior, heritage conservation, environmental sensitivity, and respect for host communities.

The theme of tourism content marketing performance identified both digital and behavioral outcomes, including conversion of online visitors into actual tourists, tourist retention, trust, content popularity, sharing, comments, word-of-mouth communication, and follower growth. This finding is important because it indicates that the effectiveness of digital content should be assessed beyond superficial engagement metrics. The ultimate value of content lies in its ability to influence behavior, build trust, sustain relationships, and contribute to actual travel decisions. The growing use of data analytics, AI, and digital measurement tools in smart tourism marketing provides destinations with greater opportunities to evaluate such outcomes systematically (Abbasivarki et al., 2024; Florido-Benítez, 2024). The findings therefore support a performance-oriented view of content marketing in which metrics such as likes and shares are meaningful only when they are connected to deeper outcomes such as trust, conversion, loyalty, and destination competitiveness.

Tourist relationship management was another significant theme. Personalized travel, travel guidance, responsiveness, tourist data management, relationship management, emerging technologies, and service quality all appeared as central elements. This finding reflects the broader transformation of tourism from transaction-oriented marketing toward relationship-oriented and experience-oriented systems. In smart tourism, technological tools can help destinations maintain continuous communication with tourists before, during, and after travel. This interpretation is consistent with the view that smart tourism integrates technologies into the entire visitor journey rather than limiting their use to pre-trip information search (Buhalis, 2020). It also corresponds with the growing role of artificial intelligence, customer data, and personalization in tourism marketing (Hajiyeva et al., 2026). For Dezful, strengthening tourist relationship management could help transform occasional visitors into repeat visitors and active advocates of the destination.

Tourist participation was also identified as a key dimension of the ecosystem. Participants highlighted social and cultural participation, environmental participation, interaction with attractions, contributions to infrastructure improvement, and participation in destination branding. This finding reflects the shift from tourists as passive consumers toward tourists as active co-creators of destination value. Social media, user-generated content, online reviews, and peer-to-peer recommendations allow tourists to participate directly in the production and circulation of destination meaning. This result is aligned with recent work showing how digital narratives and influencer-mediated content can restructure local tourism representations and reshape consumer perceptions (Wang, 2026). It also resonates with research on tourist purchasing patterns, which shows that marketing influences and social mechanisms contribute to consumer decisions in tourism contexts (Lali Sarabi et al., 2026). The involvement of tourists in content production can therefore strengthen the authenticity and reach of destination marketing.

The final theme, tourism financial performance, included competitive advantage, host-community economic growth, employment generation, and tourism revenue. This finding demonstrates that the proposed ecosystem is ultimately connected to broader development outcomes. Digital content marketing is valuable not only because it improves online visibility, but because it can contribute to higher tourist demand, longer engagement, stronger local business performance, and greater economic circulation within the destination. The emphasis on host-community benefits is especially important in the context of indigenous smart tourism, because local acceptance and participation are more likely when tourism development produces tangible economic outcomes for residents. The ecosystem perspective therefore requires the connection of marketing performance with local economic development rather than treating tourism income as an isolated industry outcome.

Overall, the findings indicate that the proposed smart tourism ecosystem in Dezful is relational, content-centered, technology-enabled, and locally embedded. Its effectiveness depends on the interaction of digital content, platforms, data,

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governance, branding, tourist relationships, stakeholder participation, and economic outcomes. This interpretation is consistent with qualitative research indicating that smart tourism destinations should be understood in context and through the meanings attributed to them by destination actors (Gelter et al., 2022). It is also consistent with the collaborative network perspective, which emphasizes that smart destination development is dependent on coordination among multiple actors rather than technological investment alone (Errichiello & Micera, 2021). The findings therefore support the argument that an indigenous model for Dezful should integrate technological intelligence with local cultural identity, stakeholder coordination, personalized communication, and sustainable destination development.

One limitation of the present study is that the findings were derived from a qualitative sample of 15 experts selected purposively on the basis of their knowledge and experience. Although this approach was appropriate for developing a context-sensitive conceptual model, the findings are interpretive and should not be generalized statistically to all tourism stakeholders or historical cities. The study was also geographically bounded to Dezful, and some identified themes may reflect the particular cultural, managerial, technological, and tourism conditions of this destination. In addition, the analysis relied substantially on expert perspectives and documentary evidence, while the direct voices of tourists, local residents, small tourism businesses, and platform users were not examined as separate participant groups. Finally, the dynamic nature of digital technologies means that some specific tools, platforms, and content practices may evolve rapidly over time.

Future studies are recommended to examine the proposed model in other historical and cultural destinations in order to compare which elements are context-specific and which may have broader applicability. Comparative qualitative studies between Dezful and other Iranian historical cities could provide a deeper understanding of the role of local identity and destination governance in smart tourism ecosystem development. Future research could also include tourists, residents, local entrepreneurs, content creators, and public-sector actors as separate stakeholder groups to examine similarities and differences in their perspectives. Longitudinal studies would be useful for investigating how digital content practices and smart tourism capabilities change over time. Researchers may also explore specific components of the model in greater depth, such as influencer collaboration, AI-generated tourism content, user-generated content, smart heritage interpretation, digital storytelling, or the relationship between content personalization and sustainable tourist behavior.

From a practical perspective, destination managers in Dezful should develop an integrated digital content strategy that links historical identity, local narratives, smart technologies, social media, and tourist relationship management. Tourism organizations should create high-quality, searchable, up-to-date, and emotionally engaging content across multiple digital platforms while adapting communication to different tourist segments. Local authorities and tourism businesses should establish mechanisms for coordinated content production, shared branding standards, data management, and performance monitoring. Partnerships with local influencers, cultural institutions, accommodation providers, restaurants, tourism agencies, and community organizations can strengthen the authenticity and reach of destination content. Practical efforts should also encourage tourists to generate and share content, while ensuring that marketing messages promote environmental responsibility, cultural respect, and local economic participation. In this way, digital content marketing can function as a central managerial instrument for strengthening Dezful's tourism competitiveness and building a coherent indigenous smart tourism ecosystem.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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