

The Importance of the ICTs in the Development of Cultural Tourism: a Comparative Study Between Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco

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Abstract:

The present paper aims at examining the importance of the ICTs in the development of cultural tourism in Algeria. This will be tackled mainly by comparing and contrasting Algeria, on the one hand, with Tunisia and Morocco on the other: two neighboring countries where tourism industry is much more developed. The comparative perspective adopted will help us highlight the cultural potential of Algeria, and the effects linked to the (non)use of the ICTs regarding their increasing importance in the sector. In this regard, the paper will focus on aspects linked to two major dimensions: 1) accommodation and 2) National Tourism Offices Websites. Such analysis allows highlighting some of the drawbacks that contribute in hindering the development of tourism, and that accordingly need to be assessed and revised if Algeria is willing to secure a place in a highly competitive and fast growing sector.

Key words: Cultural tourism, comparative study (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco), ICTs, accommodation, National Tourism Offices Websites.

“L’importance des TIC dans le développement du tourisme culturel: une étude comparative entre l’Algérie, la Tunisie, et le Maroc”

Résumé:

Le présent article tente d'examiner l'importance des TIC dans le développement du tourisme culturel en Algérie. Le sujet sera principalement abordé en comparant et en contrastant l'Algérie, d'un côté, la Tunisie et le Maroc d'un autre : deux pays voisins où l'industrie du tourisme est beaucoup plus développée. L'approche comparative adoptée nous aidera à mettre en lumière le potentiel culturel en Algérie, et les effets liés à la (non) utilisation des TIC ; cela en considérant leur importance croissante dans le secteur. A cet effet, l'article examinera des aspects liés à deux dimensions majeures: 1) Hébergement 2) Sites des Offices Nationaux de Tourisme. Cette analyse permettra de soulever certaines défaillances qui contribuent à freiner le développement du tourisme, et qui doivent ainsi être évaluées et révisées si l'Algérie ambitionne de se réserver une place dans un secteur hautement compétitif et en constante évolution.

Mots Clefs: Tourisme culturel, étude comparative (Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc), TIC, hébergement, Sites des Offices Nationaux de Tourisme.

"أهمية تكنولوجيا الإعلام والاتصال في تنمية السياحة الثقافية: دراسة مقارنة بين
الجزائر وتونس والمغرب"

ملخص:

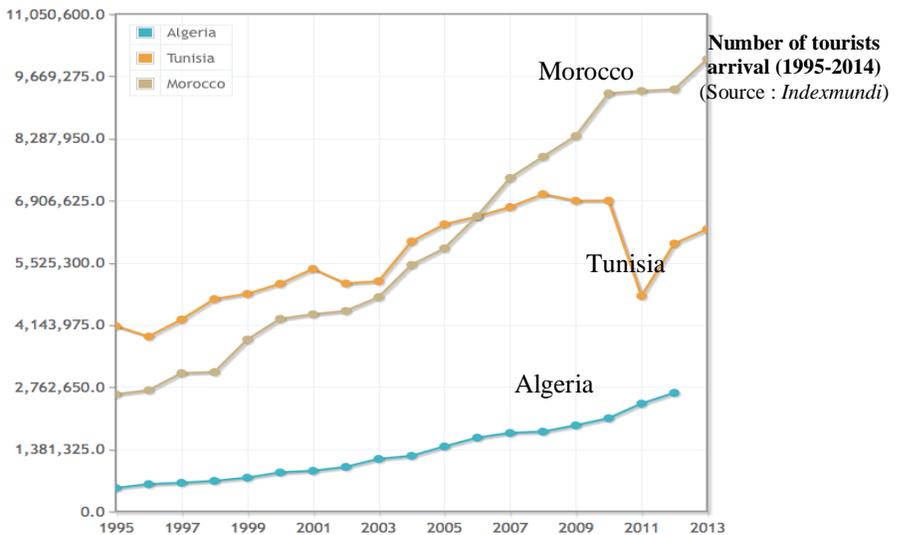
تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية إلى البحث في دور تكنولوجيا الإعلام والاتصال في تنمية السياحة الثقافية في الجزائر، وذلك من خلال المقارنة والمقابلة بين الحالة الجزائرية من جهة والحالتين التونسية والمغربية من جهة أخرى، أي البلدين الجارين اللذين يمتلكان سياحة ثقافية أكثر تطوراً بكثير. وسيمكنا منظور المقارنة من إبراز إمكانات الجزائر الثقافية والآثار المترتبة على (عدم) استخدام تكنولوجيا الإعلام والاتصال بالنظر إلى أهميتها المتزايدة في قطاع السياحة. في هذا الصدد، ستركز هذه الورقة على بعدين رئيسيين: (1) الإيواء (2) المواقع الإلكترونية للديوان الوطني للسياحة في البلدان المعنية بالدراسة، و هما البعدان اللذان سيمكنا تحليلهما من أن نضع يدنا على العوائق التي تحول دون تطور السياحة والتي يجب بالنتيجة إزالتها إن أرادت الجزائر أن تقتطع لنفسها مكانا في قطاع تشتد فيه المنافسة و يتطور بوتيرة متسارعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السياحة الثقافية - الدراسة المقارنة (الجزائر، تونس، المغرب) - تكنولوجيا الإعلام والاتصال الإيواء، المواقع الإلكترونية للديوان الوطني للسياحة.

With 1133 million tourists worldwide, 9% of world GDP (direct, indirect, and induced impact), 1 in 11 jobs, 6 % of the world's exports¹, the tourism industry "is considered one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the world" (C. Van Vuuren, 295). The 2014 United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Annual Report states that "International tourism capped off 2014 with record numbers, growing 4.4% to reach 1,135 million tourists that crossed international borders during the year, consolidating the growth after the global economic crisis and despite many challenges" (10). The same report highlights that in Africa, international tourists number grew 2% (61). However, while Sub-Saharan Africa witnessed a rise in tourist number with 3%, North Africa, and despite its substantial potential, records lower levels of arrival with only 1%, which makes it far from the international average. In 2015, international tourism seems to carry on with the same scale with a noted increase of 4% of tourist arrivals between January and April if compared to the same period last year. However, for the same period North Africa marks a

considerable decrease estimated at 7%ⁱⁱ. The decrease is certainly linked to different factors including political, social, economic, etc.

Though it possesses a certain number of factors that may make it one of the leading countries in the region when it comes to tourism, Algeria is still laying behind even when compared to other neighbouring countries like Tunisia and Morocco. The following chart makes the point clear:



Not only Algeria’s attractiveness to tourists is quite limited if compared to Tunisia and Morocco, but the gap seems to widen between them. Furthermore, a close examination of the type of tourists that cross the Algerian borders sheds light on another dimension. Actually, it is worth noticing that “Members of the Algerian Diaspora and the many Algerians living and working abroad comprised the bulk of inbound arrivals to the country in 2013” (Euromonitor). Since the primary motivation of such category of tourists is family visit, its contribution to tourism economy remains less than that of other tourists as their expenditures in relation to accommodation, food, etc. are less important. Thus, despite the timid growth marked during the last decades, Algeria is far from optimizing its resources in regard to other types of tourism.

Tourism covers a wide variety of activities and is often conceived in relation to other domains. In “Current trends in tourist motivation” Elena-Cristina Mahika points out to the fact that tourists can hold different motivations including psychological (relaxation, sun tan, exercise and health, sex); emotional (nostalgia, romance, adventure, escape, fantasy, spiritual needs); personal (visits to relatives and friends, new friends); personal development (raising the level of knowledge, learning a new skill); status (fashion, exclusivity, getting a good offer); culture (sightseeing, experience of other cultures)” (16). Tourism placing culture as the major motivation is what is commonly referred to as *cultural tourism*. Many researchers highlighted the difficulty of providing a clear definition for the term. The Routledge *Encyclopedia for Tourism* testifies to such difficulty and points out that “defining what cultural tourism constitutes is a continuing debate” (125). Such difficulty comes partly from the fact that cultural tourism is directly linked to a notion which is in itself quite difficult to delimit and define i.e. culture. One of the recurrently used definitions is the one provided by UNESCO. The later defines culture in the following terms:

the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs;

Three years after Mexico’s declaration, the UNWTO issues the following definition: “Culture tourism includes movements of persons for essentially cultural motivations such as study tours, performing arts and other cultural tours, travel to festivals and other cultural events, visit to sites and monuments, travel to study nature folklore or art or pilgrimages” (“The role of recreation”). The definition provided by the UNWTO seems to draw heavily on UNESCO’s definition covering a wide range of cultural activities.

Cultural tourism represents a very important segment of the tourism industry. For instance, according to “Eurostats cultural statistics” the cultural attractiveness is the second motivation for

Europeans (after value for money) when deciding on a holiday destination or accommodation. The same report also highlights that if European tourists had to reduce their spending during their holidays in 2009, they did it primarily for restaurants and shopping, but rarely for cultural and entertainment activities (163), a fact that stresses the importance of the cultural dimension in the whole tourism sector.

Algeria possesses an important cultural potential that can tremendously increase its attractiveness. Like Tunisia that counts 7 UNESCO cultural world heritage sites, and Morocco that counts 8, Algeria counts 7 classified sites namely: *Al Qal'a of Beni Hammad* (1980), *Djémila* (1982), *Kasbah of Algiers* (1992), *M'Zab Valley* (1982), *Timgad* (1982), *Tipasa* (1982), along with the mixed cultural-natural site *Tassili n'Ajjer* (1982). Furthermore, Algeria contains five intangible cultural elements which are classified by UNESCO: *Ahellil of Gourara* (2008), *Rites and craftsmanship associated with the wedding costume tradition of Tlemcen* (2012), *Annual pilgrimage to the mausoleum of Sidi 'Abd el-Qader Ben Mohammed* (Sidi Cheikh) (2013), *Practices and knowledge linked to the Imzad of the Tuareg communities of Algeria, Mali and Niger* (2013), *Ritual and ceremonies of Sebeïba in the oasis of Djanet* (2014). This heritage puts it in a good position with Morocco that counts 6 and Tunisia that possesses none. In addition to such internationally recognized tangible and intangible patrimonies, Algeria is also characterized by cultural diversityⁱⁱⁱ; a richness that can be used as a real booster for tourism. This is mainly due to two significant dimensions:

1- Geography: with 2,381,741 km², Algeria is the largest African country. Its natural richness and diversity, which includes (1200 km coasts on the Mediterranean sea, mountains, plains, Desert, etc.) constitutes prosperous grounds for the development of a large variety of cultural practices in relation to food, clothing, architecture, jewellery, traditions, etc. Furthermore, its geographical location makes it at the crossroads of different cultures and civilizations (Mediterranean, African, Arab, etc.).

2- History: throughout history, the Berber population that constitutes the native inhabitants of the land, and under different circumstances, witnessed a constant interaction with different cultures and civilizations: Phoenician, Roman, Numidian, Arab, Ottoman,

French, etc. Traces of each period can be observed till now through architecture, monuments, traditions, language use, etc.

Accordingly, and as one travels from east to west, and from north to south, and as one moves from large cities to small villages we can notice an important cultural diversity. Even though such cultural diversity represents the ground on which cultural tourism in Algeria can grow and prosper, it is certainly not enough since the development of the sector depends tremendously on a number of other factors. One of these is the use of information and communication technologies; commonly referred to as ICTs.

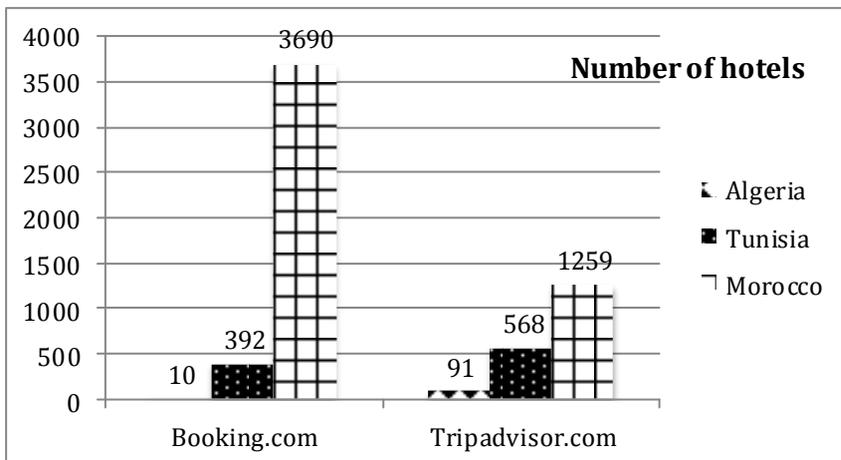
Today, Internet users represent 42.4% of world population. In 1995 they represented 0.4% (Internet World Stats). The vertiginous growth and democratization of Internet in many regions around the globe has tremendously changed people's behaviours and everyday practices. In "The Role of ICT in Tourism Industry", Anand Bethapudi observes that "demanding travelers rely heavily on electronic media to obtain information about destinations, as well as to be able to communicate their needs and wishes to suppliers rapidly" (67). Such 'dependency' on online sources is changing the paradigm of the whole tourism sector:

Paradoxically, as technology progresses, the gap between the "ICTs – included" and "the ICTs- excluded" widens, further jeopardizing the social, cultural, and economic development at the global level. Highly developed tourism markets and destinations that systematically use and benefit from advanced computer-based and Internet applications will continue to strengthen their position and affect the evolution of the sector. Conversely, others who are able to use basic or simple electronic applications, or those that do not use them at all, will stay behind and be excluded from the first tear of the global tourism community. They will inevitably be more dependent on offline and online tour operators and travel agencies for putting their offerings forward to the marketplace. (Katsoni 99-100)

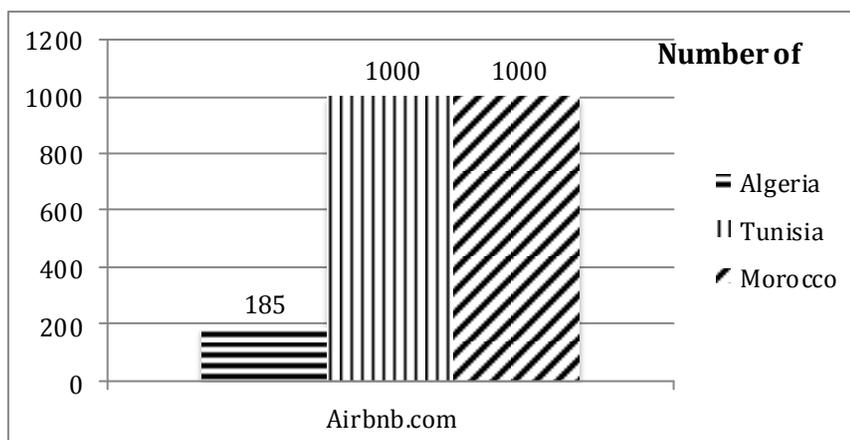
The use of ICTS is thus becoming a sine qua non for the development of the sector. If Algeria is to have a chance to get in the race of this

highly promising yet competitive sector, it needs to deploy more efforts to develop the use of the ICTs at different levels.

Such necessity appears already in one of the basic components of the tourism industry: accommodation. According to the Algerian National Office of Statistics (Office National des Statistiques), there are 1184 hotels in Algeria with a capacity of 92 737 beds. Yet, the visibility of these institutions remains very limited in specialized websites. Indeed, when examining *Booking.com* and *Tripadvisor.com*, the two globally most visited websites in 2014 (SKIFT), one can't help but observe the large gap that separates Algeria from Morocco and Tunisia:



With respectively 3690 and 1259 hotels, Morocco is heading over both Tunisia and Algeria in both websites. Yet, the gap gets much larger when it comes to Algeria that counts respectively only 10 and 91 inscribed hotels! Unfortunately, and as observed bellow, the same discrepancy can be observed when it comes to an alternative type of accommodation: one based on individual private offers. The leading site in this rapidly growing type is *Airbnb.com* which occupied the 4th position in the most visited accommodation sites in 2014:



It is worth highlighting that for both Tunisia and Morocco, the site indicates simply that they count more than 1000 accommodation offer. If *Airbnb.com* remains mainly based on individuals' willingness to open and rent their properties to tourists, making it out of state's 'official' control and much more dependent on other factors (individual, social, economic, etc.); a national strategy should be deployed in order to improve the visibility of Algerian hotels online.

@anf rH kè q kndr+Q` t'l Valdez M. points out that "Nowadays, in tourism business, destinations must design online marketing strategies to succeed in their efforts to attract visitors" (62). Part of such national strategies is deployed through the construction of national/regional official tourism websites. These sites are highly significant and may play crucial roles since they constitute the first and most official, and hence reliable, portal that introduces a given destination to tourists worldwide. Regarding their importance, many researches were conducted to propose evaluation criteria/models that may contribute in assessing and developing these sites. Among these, the criteria proposed by Park and Gretzel (2007) which identify the following elements:

- **Ease of Use** : usability, accessibility, navigability and logical structure;
- **Responsiveness**: accessibility of service representatives, e-mail service, reply to online reservations, contact information, availability of online help functions such as a toll-free telephone number;

- **Fulfillment:** order process, accuracy of service guarantee, billing accuracy, online booking process and confirmation;
- **Security/Privacy:** protecting information during transmission and subsequent storage, security for online purchases/reservations and privacy statement;
- **Personalization:** personalized attention, as well as, customization of offerings and information;
- **Visual Appearance:** attracting attention and conveying image aesthetics;
- **Information Quality:** variety, scope, currency, conciseness, accuracy and uniqueness of information, influence and reliability;
- **Trust:** brand recognition and consistency;
- **Interactivity:** interactive features such as virtual tours, interactive communication (chat, etc.). (Qtd in. Nashwa Fouad Attallah)

Based mainly on the previous factors, Attallah proposes a table that allows the evaluation of tourism websites. The table, which evolves around two major axes: content and structure, is freely adapted so that it fits the purposes of this research, and is reproduced below. The notation of each sub-element is from 0 to 1:

- 0: when the element is not available.
- 0,5: when the element is available but not enough developed or with significant drawbacks.
- 1: when the element is available.

In this frame, three websites will be evaluated:

1. Algerian National Tourism Website: It is worth highlighting that when we searched the Algerian national tourism website on Google, there were two results *onat.dz* (copyright 2013) and *ont.dz* (copyright 2015). This was actually quite confusing since both seemed to be official! We finally opted for the one with the more updated copyright (2015) i.e. *ont.dz*.
2. Tunisian National Tourism Website: *beintunisia.com*.
3. Moroccan National Tourism Website: *visitmorocco.com*.

The results of the evaluation appear in the following table:

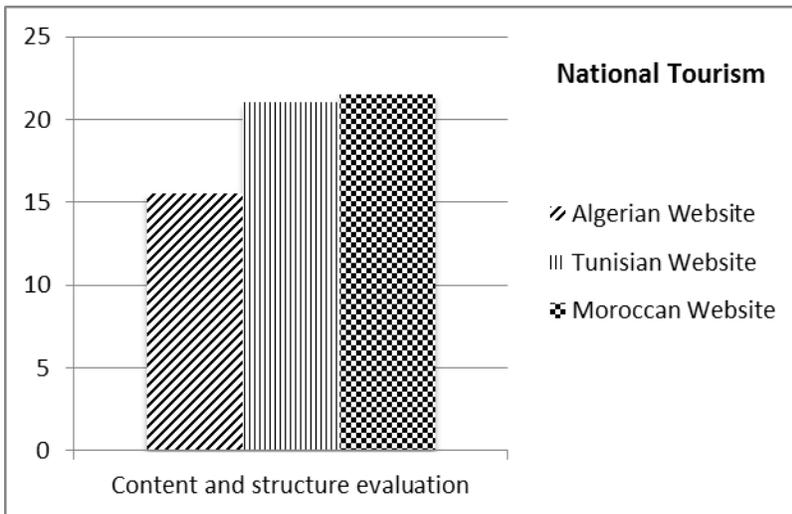
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Sites		1	2	3	
Content	Interactive elements	Interactive maps	00	01	01
		Search engine	01	01	01
		Contact information	01	01	01
	Accurate & inclusive information	accommodation	0,5	0,5	01
		weather	0,5	0,5	01
		attractions	01	01	01
		Currency exchange rates/converter	01	01	01
		Visa and/or privacy policy	0,5	0,5	0,5
	No. of site visitors		00	00	00
	Interaction with customers	Email facilities	01	01	01
		Online queries	00	00	00
		Share of ideas & experiences	00	0,5	00
		Surveys	00	00	00
	Language translation		00	01	01
	Online reservation facilities		00	00	00
	Newsletter		00	01	01
	Terms definition		00	00	00
	Brief and correct paragraphs		0,5	01	01
	Databases and directories		0,5	01	01
	Advertisement		00	00	01
Free products and services		00	00	00	
Site map		00	0,5	01	
Useful links		00	00	00	
Total		07,5	12,5	14,5	

Structure	On the home page	Site map	00	0,5	00
		Contact information	01	01	01
		A vision and/or mission	00	00	00

	On every page	A "home" button	01	01	01
		A navigation bar	01	01	01
		Sufficient white space	01	01	01
	Multimedia functions	Photographs with caption)	01	01	01
		Video and/or flash animation	01	01	0
		Striking banners	01	01	01
	Background texture and or color not overwhelming the text		01	01	01
Total			08,0	08,5	07,0

The results of the evaluation are translated into the following chart :



Once more, Algeria ranks behind both Tunisia and Morocco. In addition to the stated elements above, other significant drawbacks can be identified; drawbacks that may be quite disturbing for the website

users. For instance, the presence of certain tabs that appear in the home page along with all other pages, yet that do not function:



The presence of these tabs is confusing, not to say annoying, since the visitor may supply a lot of efforts and waste a lot of time trying to use them, yet unsuccessfully...

Another significant flaw is the language used in certain pages. The following passage, taken from the page entitled "Charles de Foucauld", is a case in point:

L'ermite des Touareg
Charles de Foucault

Fils de l'Ermitage Assekrem is Célèbre Dans Le Monde Entier. Charles de Foucault (1858-1916) l'un Voulu Au plus haut du Hoggar. De this incroyable vie d'un homme D'ABORD Destiné à la carrière militaire, salle tourné vers fils engagement chrétien, Reste CE stupéfiant monument à la gloire du Tout-Puissant, Mais aussi de Nombreuses traces Dans la région.

The language used in this extract, with all the grammatical, punctuation, and spelling mistakes that can be easily identified, along with the mixture between French and English, make the text almost unintelligible for the reader. The site thus fails to achieve its primary goal: to communicate efficiently with the visitors; visitors who actually represent potential tourists. It also affects negatively the image and credibility of the whole site for who would trust information conveyed by a team not able to use a correct language.

Thus, despite its great potential, notably in relation to cultural tourism, Algeria is still laying behind even if compared to neighbouring countries like Tunisia and Morocco. The development of the sector, that obviously depends on many other factors, is closely tied to the importance given to the ICTs. As the later are gaining increasing importance in the tourism industry worldwide, it becomes important to provide more attention to their inclusion at different levels. An adequate and strategic use may contribute in improving the visibility of Algerian potential, establishing better channels of

communication between the different stakeholders, and thus increasing the attractiveness of Algeria as destination.

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¹ UNWTO annual report 2015.

²UNWTO notes that statistics for both Africa and the Middle East should be read with caution since they are based on limited available data.

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³ In 26/02/2015 Algeria ratified the 2005 UNESCO “Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions”.