

DIASPORA-DRIVEN GROWTH: MOROCCO'S PATH TO TOURISM RESILIENCE AFTER COVID-19

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Abstract:

This article explores Morocco's communication and tourism promotion strategies in the post-COVID-19 era, focusing on the integration of destination branding and the role of the diaspora. Using data from SMIT, ONMT, and UNWTO reports, the study examines the adoption of innovative digital tools and the promotion of cultural diversity as key levers for enhancing the resilience and competitiveness of the Moroccan tourism sector. A conceptual model is proposed, structured around four pillars: evolved destination branding, strategic diaspora engagement, innovative digital strategies, and cultural authenticity. The findings highlight how these integrated approaches foster sustainable recovery, support resilient tourism growth, and strengthen Morocco's positioning as a unique and attractive destination.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Moroccan Diaspora, Destination Branding, Innovative Digital Strategies, Post-COVID-19 Recovery, Tourism Resilience, Tourism Communication, Diaspora Engagement, Cultural Diversity, Resilient Growth.

INTRODUCTION

Morocco's tourism sector is a cornerstone of the national economy, contributing significantly to GDP and supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs. Known for its rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and strategic location as a gateway between Africa and Europe, Morocco has solidified its position as a global tourist destination. In recent years, the intersection of immigration and tourism has emerged as an area of strategic importance. Migrant communities, particularly the Moroccan diaspora, play a dual role as ambassadors for their home country and as active participants in its tourism economy. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the global tourism industry, necessitating innovative strategies to rebuild and adapt. Morocco's recovery has been spearheaded by institutions such as the Moroccan National Tourism Office (ONMT) and the Moroccan Agency for Tourism Development (SMIT). Their efforts have included comprehensive communication and promotional campaigns targeting both domestic and international markets. The global framework provided by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) further emphasizes key themes such as digital transformation, cultural inclusivity, and sustainable tourism, all of which are reflected in Morocco's strategies. A notable focus in recent years has been the use of digital tools and storytelling to engage audiences, leveraging the power of social media, influencer collaborations, and immersive campaigns such as *"Morocco, Land of Light."* At the same time, immigration narratives have become integral to promoting cultural diversity and attracting tourists who seek authentic and meaningful travel experiences. These developments raise critical questions about the effectiveness and long-term impact of Morocco's tourism communication strategies.

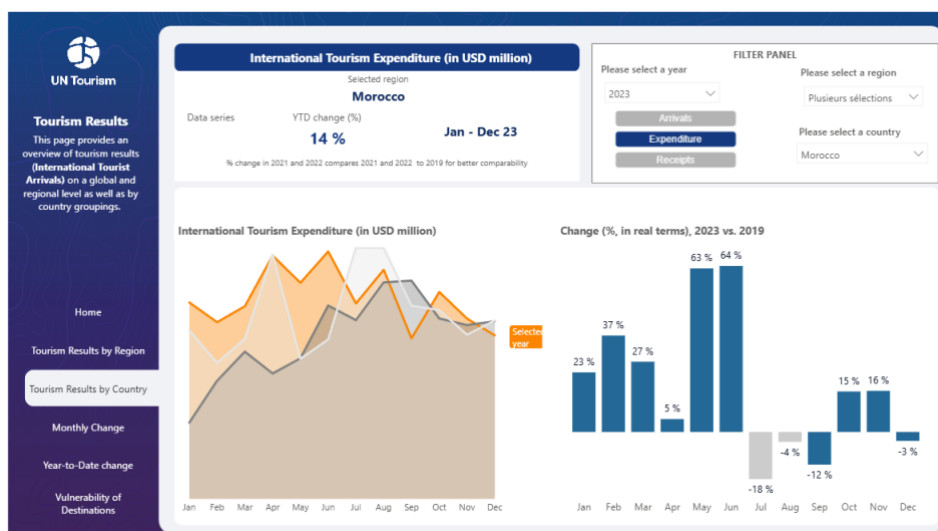


Figure 1. International tourism expenditure in Morocco from January to December 2023¹

The year 2023 marked a significant milestone for Morocco's tourism sector, showcasing its resilience and dynamic recovery from the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Morocco welcomed 14.5 million international tourists in 2023, reflecting a 34% increase compared to 2022 and a 12% rise relative to pre-pandemic levels in 2019 (Figure 1). This surge was accompanied by 25.6 million overnight stays in classified accommodations, a growth of 35% from the previous year. Moreover, tourism revenues experienced a remarkable 12% increase, reaching a total of 105 billion dirhams—33% higher than in 2019.²

The recovery was driven by a series of robust measures under the leadership of His Majesty King Mohammed VI. Key initiatives included an emergency plan to sustain tourism businesses, preserve jobs, and gradually revive the sector. Specific measures, such as the introduction of a fixed allowance and the deferral of social contributions, played a pivotal role in supporting tourism enterprises and their workforce during the health crisis.

Building on this momentum, Morocco launched the second phase of its tourism strategy for the 2023–2026 period. This roadmap is designed to enhance tourism's contribution to the national economy by fostering an integrated ecosystem. By 2026, the goals include attracting 17.5 million tourists annually, generating 120 billion dirhams in foreign exchange earnings, and creating 200,000 new direct and indirect jobs. (Ministry of Tourism, Crafts and Social and Solidarity Economy - Tourism Sector)³

¹ Source: UNWTO. (2023). International Tourism and Covid-19. Available at: <https://www.unwto.org>

² Source : 'Retour Dans La Lumière d'un Maroc En Action' Rapport de gestion 2023, ONMT.

³ Source : Feuille de route du secteur touristique et bilan législatif du Ministère du Tourisme, de l'Artisanat et de l'Économie Sociale et Solidaire - Secteur du Tourisme (février 2024)

Objectifs 2026



Figure 2: Objectives for 2026.⁴

I. THE "LIGHT IN ACTION" STRATEGY

To achieve these ambitious targets, the Moroccan National Tourism Office (ONMT) introduced the "Light in Action" strategy, built on four pillars: marketing, digitalization, air connectivity, and distribution (figure 3). This collaborative approach between public and private stakeholders seeks to amplify international promotion efforts and maximize the sector's impact globally.

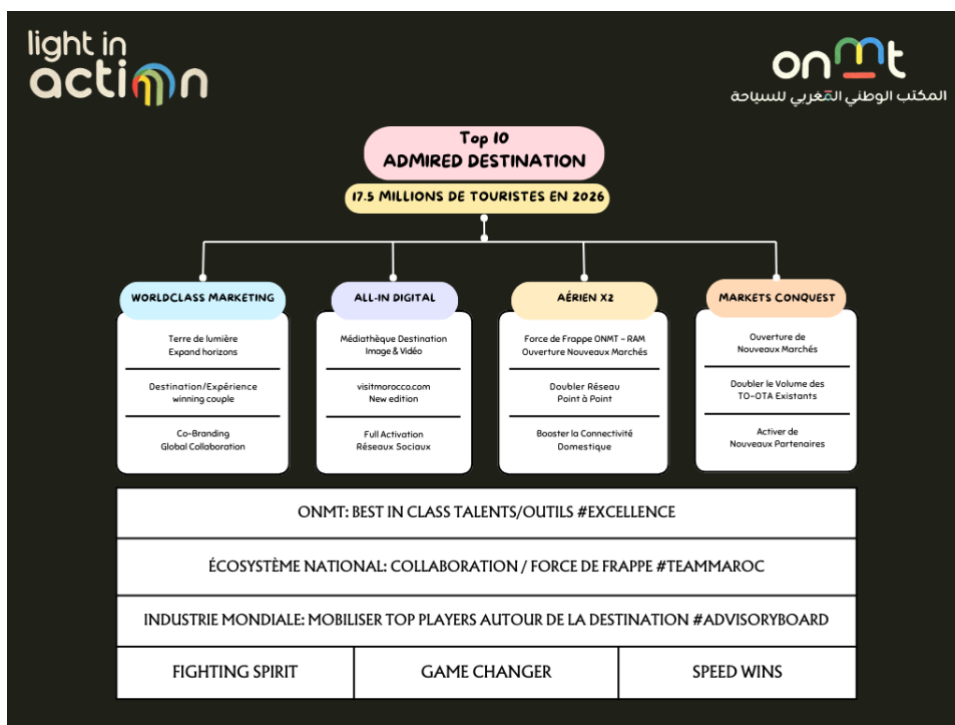


Figure 3: "Light in Action" 2023-2026 (ONMT _ 7 février 2024)⁵

The roadmap's development involved workshops and consultations with institutional and private stakeholders, culminating in a framework agreement signed in March 2023. This agreement unites key ministries and the National Tourism Confederation to ensure successful implementation. Regional tours further engaged local actors, incorporating their feedback to refine the strategy.

Research Question: This article explores the research question: “How have Morocco’s tourism communication and promotion strategies evolved in 2023–2024

⁴ Source : Office National Marocain du Tourisme, *Réalisations et Performances de l’ONMT Pour l’année 2023*, 7 February 2024.

⁵ Source : Office National Marocain du Tourisme, *Réalisations et Performances de l’ONMT Pour l’année 2023*.

to address the challenges of post-pandemic recovery and leverage immigration as a strategic asset?”

Using data from SMIT⁶, ONMT, and UNWTO reports, the study analyzes the integration of innovative communication tools, the promotion of cultural diversity, and the role of the Moroccan diaspora. By examining these strategies, the article aims to provide insights into how Morocco's tourism sector can enhance its resilience and competitiveness in an increasingly globalized and digitalized world.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

II-1. Communication and Promotion in Global Tourism

Communication and promotion have long been recognized as critical components of tourism development. According to Buhalis and Law (2008), digital tools have revolutionized how destinations engage with travelers, enabling more personalized and cost-effective outreach. Platforms like social media, augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR) allow destinations to create immersive experiences that appeal to tech-savvy audiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Post-pandemic, the role of digital communication has grown even more pronounced. The UNWTO (2022) reported that 78% of travelers now seek information online before choosing a destination, underscoring the importance of well-crafted digital campaigns. Morocco's emphasis on campaigns such as "**Morocco, Land of Light**", which leveraged cinematic storytelling and targeted millennial travelers, reflects these global trends.

In addition, destination promotion has increasingly focused on sustainability. Studies by Font and McCabe (2017) argue that tourists are more inclined to support destinations that emphasize eco-friendly practices and cultural preservation. Morocco's eco-tourism initiatives, particularly in rural areas, align with this shift, presenting the country as a responsible and attractive choice for conscious travelers.

II-2. The Role of Immigration in Tourism

Immigration is intricately linked with tourism, particularly in countries like Morocco that boast a significant global diaspora. Studies highlight the role of diasporas in fostering "VFR" tourism, which constitutes a substantial portion of international travel (King, 2017). Moroccan emigrants, estimated to number over five million (World Bank, 2022), often act as informal ambassadors, sharing their cultural heritage with host communities and encouraging visits to their home country.

Research by Duval (2004) emphasizes that diaspora-driven tourism not only boosts visitor numbers but also enhances cultural exchange and understanding. This is particularly relevant in Morocco, where the government has actively engaged with its diaspora through targeted campaigns and cultural events. For example, ONMT initiatives have focused on promoting Moroccan cultural heritage to second- and third-generation diaspora members.

Furthermore, integrating immigration narratives into promotional strategies has been shown to enhance a destination's brand. Studies by Coles and Timothy (2004) indicate that marketing campaigns emphasizing cultural diversity appeal to modern travelers seeking authentic and meaningful experiences. Morocco's unique position as a destination that celebrates its multicultural identity has been effectively utilized in recent

⁶ Source : (SMIT) Société Marocaine d'Ingénierie Touristique, *Stratégie de Développement Du Produit Touristique*, 7 February 2024.

communication

efforts.

II-3. Morocco's Tourism Strategies: A Review

Morocco's strategic approach to tourism promotion has evolved significantly in the past decade. Drawing on reports from the Moroccan National Tourism Office (ONMT, 2023) and the Moroccan Agency for Tourism Development (SMIT, 2024), several key areas of focus emerge:

Branding and Marketing Campaigns : The launch of "**Morocco, Land of Light**" in 2022 marked a turning point in the country's tourism branding. This campaign utilized high-quality visual storytelling to showcase Morocco as a modern and diverse destination. According to ONMT (2023), the campaign reached over 50 million people globally, with significant engagement from European and North American audiences.

Digital Transformation : Digital tools have played a transformative role in Morocco's tourism sector. The use of VR experiences, influencer collaborations, and social media analytics has allowed for more targeted promotional efforts (SMIT, 2024). For instance, ONMT's partnerships with travel bloggers and YouTubers have driven increased visibility among younger travelers.

Diaspora Engagement : Programs such as "Morocco My Country" aim to strengthen ties with the Moroccan diaspora while encouraging them to promote the country as a destination. According to UNWTO (2023), such initiatives significantly boost tourism flows and foster positive perceptions of Morocco abroad.

Sustainability and Inclusivity : Morocco's commitment to sustainability is evident in its promotion of eco-tourism projects in rural areas. These initiatives not only preserve natural resources but also create opportunities for local communities. Studies by Gössling and Hall (2019) underscore the importance of such approaches in enhancing a destination's appeal to environmentally conscious travelers.

Challenges : Despite its successes, Morocco faces challenges in maintaining its competitive edge. Rival Mediterranean destinations such as Spain and Turkey have invested heavily in tourism promotion, posing stiff competition. Additionally, economic uncertainties and global political shifts may affect international travel patterns.

II-4. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates two key theoretical frameworks—destination branding and diaspora tourism—to analyze Morocco's communication strategies. These frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how Morocco's promotional efforts can enhance the resilience of its tourism sector and foster sustainable growth.

Destination Branding (Anholt, 2007)

The concept of destination branding has become central in tourism marketing and development. Anholt (2007) introduced the idea that countries, cities, and regions need to manage their image as a brand to remain competitive in an increasingly globalized world. This theory suggests that a destination's brand identity is shaped not only by traditional tourism attributes such as attractions, amenities, and experiences, but also by the broader socio-political and cultural environment. Anholt's model emphasizes the importance of aligning the branding message with the country's intrinsic values and distinguishing features, which can resonate with both potential visitors and the diaspora. In Morocco's case, its "**Morocco, Land of Light**" campaign is a prime example of destination branding. By highlighting the country's unique cultural heritage, diverse

landscapes, and modern tourism infrastructure, Morocco seeks to present itself as a multifaceted destination that appeals to different market segments—ranging from adventure tourists to those seeking luxury or cultural experiences. Furthermore, the campaign's use of cinematic visuals and immersive digital tools taps into the emotional and sensory experiences that are critical in destination branding (Morgan et al., 2011). According to Anholt's theory, this strategy not only enhances Morocco's image as a desirable tourist destination but also reinforces its identity on the global stage. Destination branding theory further posits that a well-crafted brand can help a destination recover from crises, such as the post-pandemic tourism slump. By re-establishing a strong brand presence, Morocco can create a sense of trust and familiarity among travelers, which is critical during times of uncertainty (Kapferer, 2008). The Moroccan government's strategic focus on resilience through targeted marketing and digital transformation efforts exemplifies this principle, demonstrating the importance of branding in sustaining tourism even in challenging times.

Diaspora Tourism (Duval, 2004)

The diaspora tourism framework is another critical lens through which to examine Morocco's communication strategies. Duval (2004) highlights how diasporas contribute to tourism in both direct and indirect ways. Diaspora tourism is often categorized into VFR (Visiting Friends and Relatives) and heritage tourism, both of which are crucial drivers of travel to Morocco. The Moroccan diaspora, spread across Europe, North America, and the Middle East, plays an essential role in bridging the gap between Morocco and the global tourist market.

Duval's (2004) theory emphasizes the reciprocal nature of the relationship between migration and tourism. While Moroccan emigrants are the primary source of VFR tourism, they also contribute to the promotion of their homeland as a tourist destination. As informal ambassadors, diaspora members actively share cultural narratives and personal stories about Morocco, which can influence the decision-making of potential visitors. This process of cultural exchange enhances the reputation of Morocco as an authentic and welcoming destination. Furthermore, the emotional connection that diaspora communities have with their home country means they are more likely to encourage tourism within their networks, whether through personal recommendations or participation in diaspora-led cultural events (King, 2017).

The diaspora engagement strategies employed by ONMT and SMIT, such as campaigns specifically targeting second- and third-generation Moroccan emigrants, exemplify how Morocco is leveraging its diaspora in tourism promotion. These strategies align with Duval's (2004) assertion that diaspora tourism is more than just a tool for generating visitor numbers—it is an avenue for fostering cultural diplomacy and international soft power. By emphasizing Morocco's multicultural identity and showcasing its diverse cultural heritage through targeted communication campaigns, Morocco strengthens its position as a unique and inclusive destination.

Additionally, diaspora tourism intersects with destination branding. According to the brand-culture model proposed by Dinnie (2015), diaspora communities help maintain a destination's cultural authenticity by serving as cultural mediators. This authenticity enhances a destination's overall appeal, particularly among travelers who seek authenticity and meaningful cultural interactions. Morocco's diaspora, through their active participation in the nation's tourism initiatives, helps to maintain the country's cultural narrative while also presenting an updated, modern image of Moroccan society to global audiences.

Diaspora Tourism: A Strategic Perspective (Duval, 2004)

Diaspora tourism offers a critical framework for understanding the interplay between migration and tourism in Morocco's context. Duval (2004) underscores the significant contributions of diaspora communities to tourism, both directly, through visits, and indirectly, as cultural ambassadors. Morocco's extensive diaspora, primarily concentrated in Europe, North America, and the Middle East, plays a dual role in driving tourism and fostering cultural connections between Morocco and the global market.

Duval's (2004) theory highlights the reciprocal relationship between migration and tourism. Moroccan emigrants are a key source of Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) tourism, while simultaneously promoting their homeland as an appealing destination. Acting as informal cultural mediators, diaspora members share narratives, traditions, and personal experiences about Morocco, influencing potential visitors' travel decisions. This exchange fosters a perception of Morocco as an authentic, hospitable, and culturally rich destination. Additionally, the emotional ties of diaspora communities to their homeland enhance their active involvement in promoting tourism, whether through personal endorsements, participation in cultural festivals, or leveraging social and professional networks (King, 2017).

Morocco's strategic engagement with its diaspora, as reflected in initiatives by the Moroccan National Tourist Office (ONMT) and the Moroccan Agency for Tourism Development (SMIT), aligns with Duval's assertion that diaspora tourism extends beyond economic benefits. It serves as a tool for cultural diplomacy and the enhancement of Morocco's international soft power. Specific campaigns targeting second- and third-generation Moroccan expatriates underscore this approach. By showcasing Morocco's diverse cultural heritage and emphasizing its multicultural identity, these campaigns contribute to a positive and inclusive image of the country.

Moreover, diaspora tourism intersects significantly with destination branding. Dinnie's (2015) brand-culture model posits that diaspora communities play a pivotal role in maintaining and communicating a destination's cultural authenticity. In Morocco's case, its diaspora not only supports the preservation of traditional cultural narratives but also aids in projecting a modern, dynamic image of Moroccan society. These efforts bolster the nation's appeal, particularly among travelers seeking genuine cultural experiences and meaningful engagement.

Recent data further supports the impact of diaspora tourism. ONMT(2023) report revealed that diaspora-driven travel accounted for approximately 20-25% of Morocco's total international arrivals. Specifically, marketing campaigns targeting diaspora communities during cultural and religious events, such as Eid al-Fitr, achieved a notable 15% increase in VFR tourism. Similarly, heritage tourism—focused on ancestral exploration—resonates deeply within diaspora populations, contributing to Morocco's robust positioning as a culturally and historically significant destination.

Contribution of Diaspora Tourism to Moroccan Tourism (2023)

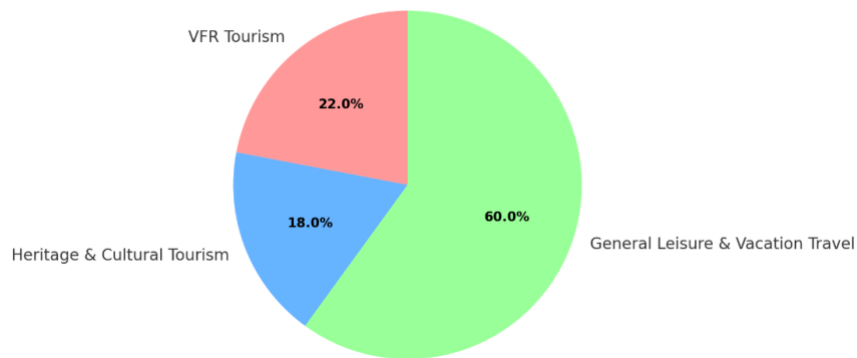


Figure 4: Contribution of Diaspora Tourism to Moroccan Tourism (2023)⁷

Furthermore, the 2023 SMIT report highlights that 75% of Moroccan diaspora members actively recommend Morocco as a travel destination within their networks. This word-of-mouth promotion underscores the diaspora's critical role in amplifying Morocco's tourism efforts and sustaining its reputation as a global cultural hub.

III. SYNTHESIS OF THEORIES: DESTINATION BRANDING AND DIASPORA TOURISM

To understand Morocco's communication and promotion strategies in a post-pandemic context, combining destination branding and diaspora tourism is essential. The integrated approach underscores the importance of a strong national identity while leveraging the emotional and social connections of the diaspora.

In the context of post-pandemic recovery, these two theories provide valuable insights into how Morocco's resilience is being built through targeted branding and diaspora engagement. With the tourism industry heavily impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, countries have turned to digital solutions and innovative marketing strategies to re-establish their image.

The following conceptual model illustrates how Morocco can integrate these two frameworks to foster sustainable growth in its tourism sector while engaging its diaspora effectively:

Incorporating the insights from these frameworks, this study aims to answer the following research question: **“How have Morocco's tourism communication and promotion strategies evolved in 2023-2024 to address the challenges of post-pandemic recovery and leverage immigration as a strategic asset?”**

By answering this question, the study will analyze how Morocco has used destination branding and diaspora tourism to rejuvenate the tourism sector and promote sustainable growth, while maintaining cultural authenticity and fostering resilience.

Conceptual Model: Integrating Destination Branding and Diaspora Tourism for Post-Pandemic Recovery

⁷Source : (SMIT) Société Marocaine d'Ingénierie Touristique, *Stratégie de Développement Du Produit Touristique*, 7 February 2024.

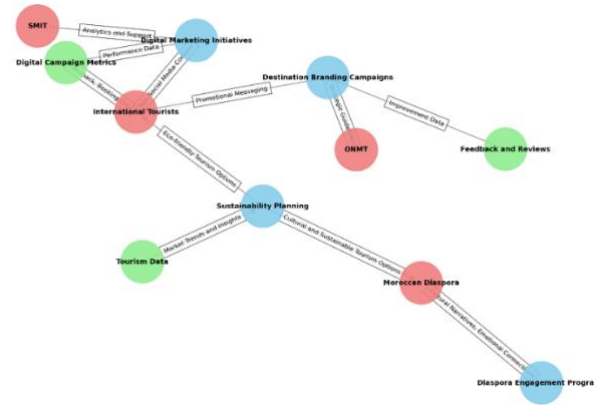
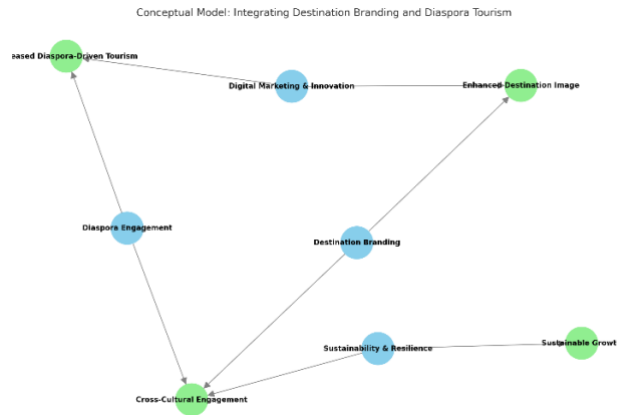


Figure 5: Conceptual Model of Morocco's Tourism Communication Strategies⁸

Figure 6: Data Flow Relationships Diagram for Moroccan Tourism communication Strategies⁹

In analyzing Morocco's tourism communication and promotion strategies in 2023-2024, a conceptual model can be proposed to illustrate the evolution of these approaches in the post-pandemic recovery context (figure 5). This model is built on four key pillars: evolved destination branding, which focuses on redefining Morocco's image as a safe and attractive destination by emphasizing its cultural identity and unique heritage; strategic diaspora engagement, which positions the diaspora as ambassadors who enhance the country's international visibility while fostering visits; innovative digital strategies, which leverage digital technologies and online platforms to reach targeted audiences globally; and cultural authenticity and resilience, aimed at ensuring sustainable growth that respects Morocco's cultural values.

These pillars interact to achieve key outcomes, including the post-pandemic recovery of the tourism sector, the enhancement of Morocco's destination image, sustainable tourism growth, and an increase in diaspora-driven tourism flows. This model highlights the integration of these components, demonstrating how branding and digital tools can strengthen diaspora engagement and promote an authentic vision of Morocco, while addressing the challenges faced by the tourism sector in a post-COVID-19 world as well described in the figure 6.

CONCLUSION

Morocco's post-pandemic tourism recovery underscores the importance of blending theoretical frameworks such as destination branding and diaspora tourism into innovative and actionable strategies. By synthesizing insights from SMIT, ONMT, and UNWTO reports, the study highlights how Morocco can strategically leverage these approaches to bolster resilience, enhance competitiveness, and maintain its cultural authenticity in a rapidly digitalizing tourism landscape.

The proposed conceptual model (Figure 5) illustrates how Morocco can adopt a multi-faceted approach that prioritizes sustainability, digital transformation, and diaspora engagement. This aligns with Gössling and Hall's (2019) findings, which emphasize that sustainable tourism practices, particularly those leveraging local communities and technological innovation, are key to creating value in global tourism markets. Similarly, Russell King's (2013) research on diaspora dynamics reinforces the critical role of

⁸ Source: Developed by us.

⁹ Source: Developed by us.

Moroccan emigrants in amplifying the country's cultural visibility and fostering tourism flows.

Practical Strategies for Policy and Industry Stakeholders:

Reinforcing Destination Identity: Morocco's commitment to its cultural heritage is crucial for differentiating itself in the global tourism market (Harris, Griffin, & Williams, 2012). By promoting its unique traditions and values through strategic branding efforts, Morocco can attract culturally curious and sustainability-oriented travelers.

Empowering Diaspora Contributions: Studies like those by Duval (2004) underscore the potential of diaspora networks in promoting "VFR" (visiting friends and relatives) tourism. Morocco can further institutionalize this engagement by co-creating tourism campaigns with diaspora communities, thus enhancing their ambassadorial role.

Adopting Digital Transformation: The integration of digital tools, such as virtual reality and personalized marketing platforms, aligns with Buhalis and Amaranggana's (2015) concept of "smart tourism." Such technologies allow destinations to remain competitive while offering innovative and immersive travel experiences.

Promoting Sustainable and Responsible Tourism: Gössling and Hall (2019) highlight that eco-tourism projects foster sustainable growth by balancing economic development with environmental preservation. Morocco's rural tourism initiatives can serve as benchmarks for integrating these principles into broader national tourism strategies.

Recommendations for Future Research :

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis, further exploration is needed to assess the long-term impacts of these strategies on Morocco's tourism sector. Future research could focus on:

- The application of artificial intelligence and big data analytics to personalize and optimize tourism marketing campaigns (Tussyadiah, 2020).
- The socio-economic outcomes of diaspora-driven tourism on local communities, as suggested by King (2013) and UNWTO (2023).
- Comparative studies with nations implementing similar recovery frameworks to identify best practices and potential pitfalls.

By continually innovating and integrating sustainability, digitalization, and diaspora collaboration, Morocco can position itself as a resilient and sustainable global tourism destination, capable of navigating the complexities of the post-pandemic era.

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