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Optimizing tourism-led growth in West Africa: A regional political economy and institutional perspective

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Abstract

Tourism is increasingly recognized as a viable pathway for economic diversification, employment creation, and foreign exchange generation in developing regions. In West Africa, however, tourism's growth potential remains constrained by weak infrastructure, fragmented policy frameworks, governance deficiencies, and limited regional coordination. This study examines how a regionally coordinated political economy and institutional framework can optimize tourism-led growth across the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Drawing on political economy theory, institutional economics, and destination competitiveness models, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining panel data analysis for 2010–2023, exploratory cluster analysis, and qualitative comparative case studies. The results demonstrate that infrastructure development, governance quality, and digital readiness exert statistically significant positive effects on tourism outcomes. Regional integration further enhances these effects when embedded within credible institutional arrangements. Governance quality plays a critical moderating role, amplifying the returns to both infrastructure investment and digital transformation. By contrast, weak institutions dilute these gains and limit the effectiveness of regional initiatives. The study advances the literature by conceptualizing tourism development as a regional public good within an integrated economic space. It proposes an empirically grounded framework that links national enabling conditions with supranational coordination mechanisms. The findings provide policy-relevant insights for ECOWAS and African policymakers, highlighting the importance of institutional reform, regionally coordinated infrastructure planning, digital integration, and collective tourism governance. More broadly, the study contributes to debates on tourism-led growth, regional development, and institutional capacity in Africa and other developing regional blocs, with clear implications for sustainable inclusive development.

Keywords: Tourism-led growth; Regional integration; Political economy; Institutional quality; Digital transformation; West Africa

1. Introduction

Tourism has emerged as an increasingly important driver of economic growth, structural transformation, and employment generation in developing economies. Globally, the sector contributes significantly to gross domestic product (GDP), trade in services, and job creation, particularly in regions seeking to diversify away from primary commodity dependence (Citaristi, 2022; World Bank, 2024). In Africa, tourism is widely viewed as a strategic sector capable of fostering inclusive growth, stimulating infrastructure development, and enhancing international integration. Despite these opportunities, tourism performance across African subregions remains uneven, with West Africa

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consistently underperforming relative to Eastern and Southern Africa in terms of international arrivals, tourism receipts, and global competitiveness indicators.

West Africa possesses substantial tourism assets, including rich cultural heritage, coastal ecosystems, biodiversity, and historical landmarks. Nevertheless, the region's tourism sector remains constrained by persistent structural and institutional challenges. These include inadequate transport and digital infrastructure, weak governance and regulatory environments, fragmented national tourism policies, and limited cross-border coordination. Regional insecurity and political instability in parts of the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea further undermine investor confidence and destination attractiveness

(World Bank Group, 2021; Luke and Leeson, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified these vulnerabilities, revealing the limited resilience of tourism systems in the absence of institutional depth and regional cooperation (Orianne, 2023; UNWTO, 2022). As a result, recovery trajectories have diverged sharply across countries, reinforcing the importance of governance capacity and coordinated policy responses.

Existing tourism literature on West Africa has largely focused on country-level performance, tourism-growth linkages, or descriptive assessments of sectoral challenges. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often overlook the inherently regional nature of tourism systems, particularly within economically integrated spaces such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Tourism flows, infrastructure networks, labor mobility, and investment decisions frequently transcend national borders, suggesting that isolated national strategies may be insufficient to unlock the sector's full growth potential. Recent development research increasingly emphasizes that regional public goods, institutional harmonization, and supranational coordination are essential for addressing shared constraints and achieving scale economies in developing regions (Byiers et al., 2021; Citaristi, 2022).

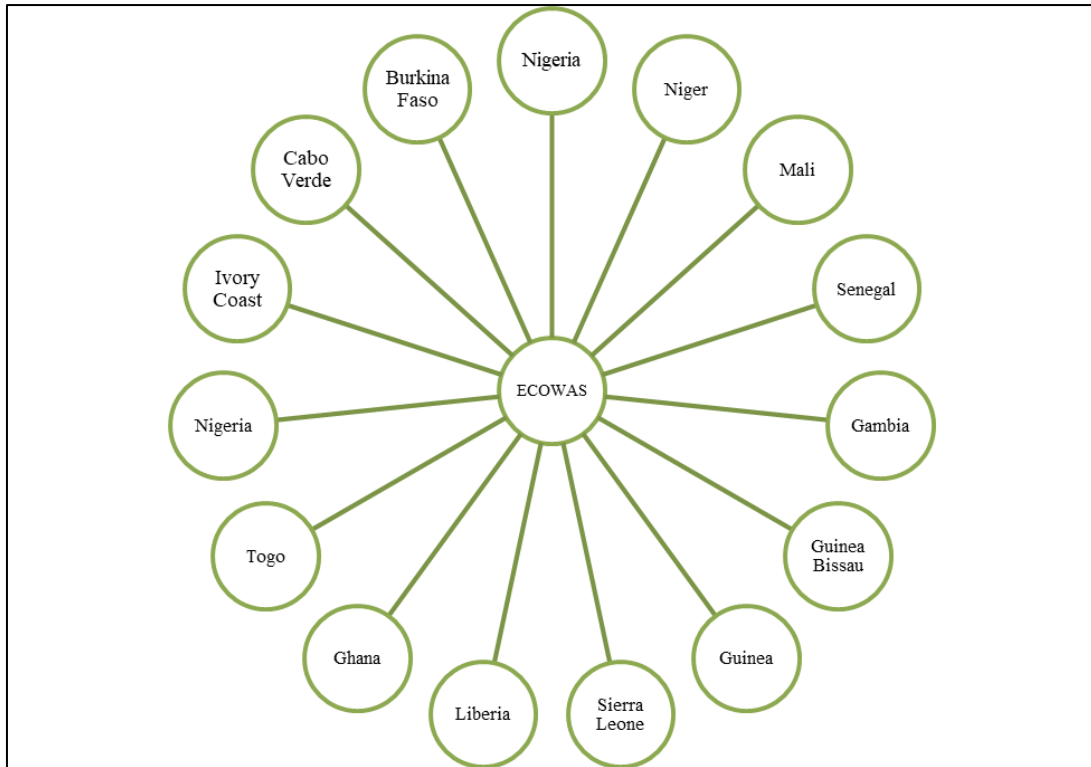
Against this backdrop, this study advances a regional political economy and institutional perspective on tourism-led growth in West Africa. It argues that tourism development in the region should be understood not merely as a sectoral or national policy issue but as a multidimensional regional development challenge shaped by institutional quality, governance incentives, infrastructure connectivity, and digital transformation. Drawing on political economy theory, institutional economics, and destination competitiveness frameworks, the study conceptualizes tourism as a regional public good whose returns are contingent on collective action and institutional coherence.

Empirically, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining panel data analysis for 15 ECOWAS countries over the period 2010–2023, exploratory cluster analysis, and qualitative comparative case studies. This design enables the identification of structural patterns, enabling conditions, and institutional mechanisms underpinning tourism performance across heterogeneous national contexts. Particular attention is given to the moderating role of governance quality and the extent to which regional integration mechanisms enhance or constrain tourism-led growth.

By offering an integrated regional framework for tourism development, this study contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, it extends tourism-led growth research by embedding tourism outcomes within a political economy and institutional context. Second, it provides empirical evidence on the interaction between governance, digital readiness, infrastructure, and regional integration in shaping tourism performance. Third, it generates policy-relevant insights for ECOWAS and African policymakers seeking to position tourism as a catalyst for sustainable regional development. In doing so, the study responds to growing calls for Africa-centred, theory-informed, and policy-relevant research on regional development pathways.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on tourism, regional integration, governance, and institutional development. Section 3 outlines the data sources, methodological approach, and analytical framework. Section 4 presents and discusses the empirical findings. Section 5 offers policy implications and strategic recommendations. Section 6 concludes and identifies directions for future research.

Figure 1 provides an exploratory cluster-based overview of tourism development patterns across ECOWAS member states, highlighting structural heterogeneity in tourism performance prior to the econometric analysis.



Source: Author's clustering analysis based on WDI, UNWTO, WEF and AfDB indicators.; **Note:** The clustering is based on standardized tourism infrastructure, arrivals, receipts, governance, and digital readiness indicators.

Figure 1 Tourism Development Clusters in ECOWAS Countries

Figure 1 presents an exploratory cluster analysis of 15 ECOWAS countries based on key tourism-related indicators, including tourism infrastructure, visitor volumes, service quality, economic contribution, environmental readiness, and institutional conditions.

The clustering reveals three broad tourism development profiles. The high-performance cluster is dominated by Cabo Verde, reflecting its strong specialization in tourism, advanced service infrastructure, and high visitor intensity. Senegal and Ghana also appear close to this cluster, supported by relatively strong institutions, superior air connectivity, and sustained tourism demand.

The emerging tourism cluster includes countries such as Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, and Nigeria. These countries exhibit moderate tourism performance, combining growing infrastructure investment and increasing arrivals with persistent institutional, environmental, and security constraints.

The lower-development or vulnerable cluster comprises Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone. These countries are characterized by weak infrastructure, political or security instability, low international arrivals, and limited tourism investment.

Overall, as illustrated in Figure 1, the clustering provides a diagnostic snapshot of tourism competitiveness in West Africa

2. Literature Review

2.1. Tourism and Economic Development in Developing Regions

The role of tourism in driving economic growth and development has been extensively examined in the development economics literature. According to UNWTO (2020), tourism contributes over 10% of global GDP, thus establishing itself as a leading export sector for numerous developing countries. In Africa, tourism is recognized as a powerful tool for stimulating job creation, increasing foreign exchange earnings, and promoting infrastructural development (Christie et al., 2013; Rogerson, 2007). In regions such as East Africa and Southern Africa, targeted tourism investment has been

demonstrated to engender quantifiable enhancements in GDP, ameliorated rural livelihoods, and augmented international visibility (Novelli, 2015). Nevertheless, West Africa has not yet made full use of these opportunities, as evidenced by its poor competitiveness indices, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient visitor arrivals (World Bank, 2021).

2.2. Barriers to Tourism Development in West Africa

A plethora of studies have identified the structural impediments that hinder tourism growth in West African countries. The issue of inadequate transport infrastructure, encompassing insufficient road networks, restricted international flight connectivity, and underdeveloped domestic tourism circuits, persists as a pivotal constraint (Ezeuduji, 2015; Adebayo & Iweka, 2020). Furthermore, the fragmentation of visa and immigration policies across the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been identified as a key factor in the reduction of intra-regional mobility, despite the establishment of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons. Inconsistent regulations, a lack of harmonized marketing strategies, and limited private-sector involvement further weaken the region's ability to compete globally (Akama and Kieti, 2007).

Governance challenges significantly shape tourism outcomes in West Africa, particularly through corruption, weak regulatory capacity, and inconsistent policy implementation (Hall, 2011; Mauro, 1995). These challenges are compounded by regional insecurity, ranging from piracy in the Gulf of Guinea to insurgencies in the Sahel, which deters both foreign and domestic tourism (Mbaiwa, 2011). The absence of coordinated policies across ECOWAS member states has resulted in fragmented national strategies, limiting the economies of scale typically associated with regional tourism planning and collective destination branding.

2.3. Regional Integration and Tourism Synergy

While most of the literature on regional integration focuses on trade, energy, and transportation (UNECA, 2016), emerging studies suggest that similar principles could apply to the development of tourism. The theory of regional public goods (Estevadeordal et al., 2004) posits that coordinated regional action can yield benefits that extend beyond national borders, encompassing shared infrastructure, common visa regimes, and regional branding campaigns. In the domain of tourism, such collaborative endeavors have the potential to markedly reduce transaction costs, attract joint investment, and diversify tourist itineraries beyond single-country experiences (Osei & Domfeh, 2019).

Examples from other African subregions offer valuable insights. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has promoted transboundary tourism through the KAZA Transfrontier Conservation Area, which links Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the East African Community (EAC) has introduced a unified tourist visa that facilitates travel to Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda. These initiatives illustrate the significance of regionalism in the tourism sector and provide valuable insights for West Africa, where the utilization of regional approaches remains underdeveloped.

2.4. The Role of Governance and Institutions

The concept of good governance is a widely accepted prerequisite for effective tourism development. In accordance with the precepts of institutional economic theory (North, 1990), the quality of formal and informal institutions exerts a significant influence on investment outcomes and long-term development trajectories. Empirical studies demonstrate that nations with minimal corruption, stable political systems, and transparent regulatory environments are more likely to attract tourism-related foreign direct investment (FDI) and ensure the sustainability of tourism resources (Hall, 2011; Dwyer et al., 2014). In West Africa, the absence of robust institutional frameworks frequently gives rise to substandard maintenance of tourism infrastructure, insufficient regulatory oversight, and an inadequate capacity for destination management.

Moreover, research findings indicate that governance quality plays a moderating role in the relationship between public expenditure and tourism outcomes. This is evidenced by the failure of significant tourism investments to yield positive development effects in the absence of robust institutions (Blanke and Chiesa, 2013). Consequently, institutional reform and the enhancement of governance are not marginal concerns but pivotal mechanisms in the optimization of tourism.

2.5. Digital Transformation and Tourism Innovation

The intersection of digital technology and tourism development is an area of study that is gaining increasing importance (OECD, 2020). The advent of digital technologies, encompassing online booking systems, virtual marketing platforms, data analytics, and smart infrastructure, has profoundly transformed the global tourism value chain (Gretzel *et al.*, 2015). Nevertheless, the digital divide remains pronounced in numerous West African nations. The limited availability

of the internet, coupled with the absence of adequate digital literacy skills and the inadequacy of ICT infrastructure, has been shown to have a detrimental effect on the visibility and competitiveness of tourism offerings (Ndung'u and Signé, 2020). Research from Asia and Latin America indicates that digital transformation can significantly increase destination access and operational efficiency when accompanied by appropriate skills development and policy support (UNCTAD, 2019).

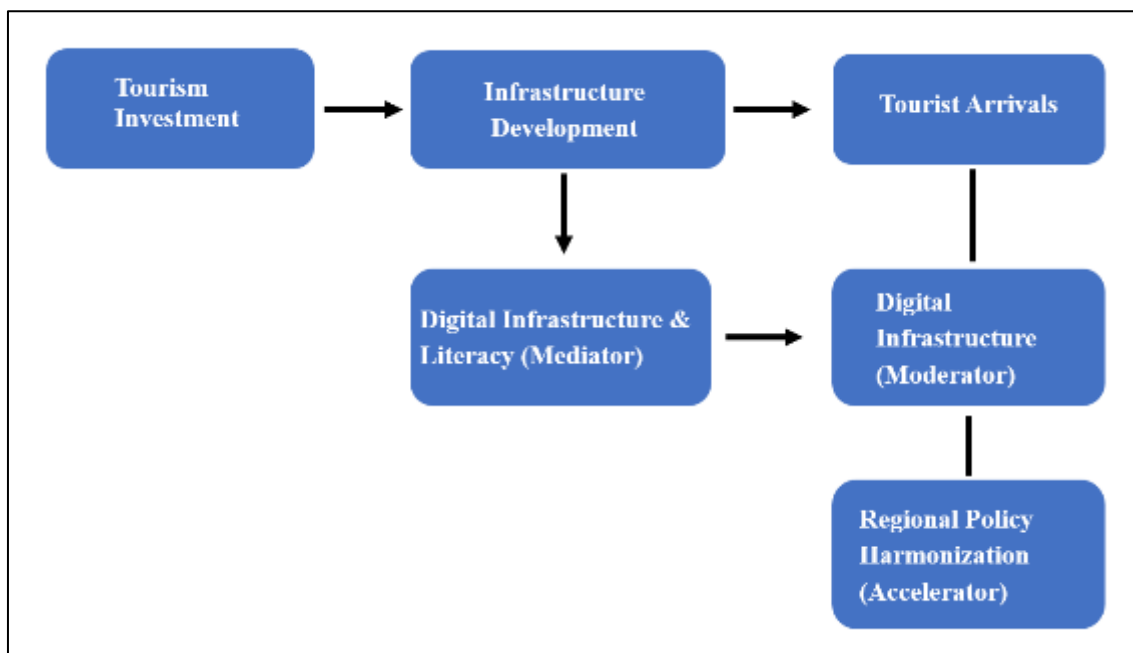
In the West African context, there is a paucity of studies that have empirically examined the potential of digital tools to enhance regional tourism integration. Such tools might include shared platforms for tourist information, regional booking portals, and mobile border-crossing tools. The necessity to bridge this gap is paramount for the modern tourism sector to thrive and demonstrate resilience.

2.6. Theoretical Approaches to Regional Tourism Development

Three primary theoretical frameworks are used in this study to conceptualize the optimization of tourism in West Africa:

- The Political Economy Theory is a theoretical framework that assists in elucidating the manner in which political incentives, institutional arrangements, and state-business relations exert influence on the formulation and consequences of tourism policy (Hall, 1994).
- Institutional economics is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the role of formal institutions (e.g., laws and regulations) and informal norms (e.g., trust and cooperation) in shaping development (North, 1990).
- The study examines destination competitiveness models, with particular reference to the frameworks developed by (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003) and (Dwyer and Kim, 2003) was found to have a positive, though less pronounced, direct effect.

The frameworks outlined in this article form the basis of a multidimensional regional model, integrating infrastructure development, governance reform, digital inclusion, and cross-border coordination as interdependent components of tourism optimization. Figure 2 synthesizes these theoretical perspectives into an integrated conceptual framework linking political economy, institutional quality, and destination competitiveness within a regional tourism development model.



Source: Author's compilation.

Figure 2 Conceptual Framework for Regionally Anchored Tourism-Led Growth

By showing how governance structures, regulatory quality, and regional integration mechanisms interact with tourism sector dynamics to determine growth outcomes in West Africa, Figure 2 synthesizes the political economy, institutional, and competitiveness frameworks supporting the empirical model. It captures the feedback effects between

competitiveness, investment, and policy coordination while highlighting the crucial role of institutions in mediating the relationship between tourism development and economic performance. The paradigm emphasizes that tourism-driven growth relies on supportive political economies, effective institutions, and unified regional policies, alongside market forces.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the enabling conditions and barriers to tourism development across West African countries. The objective is to generate a regionally grounded framework by triangulating empirical data, theoretical models, and comparative regional analysis. The research is structured into three key phases: (1) data collection and diagnostic profiling, (2) econometric and institutional analysis, and (3) synthesis of policy-relevant insights through a conceptual framework.

3.2. Scope and Units of Analysis

The study covers 15 West African countries, all members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS): Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. The unit of analysis is the country-year, spanning the period 2010–2023. This temporal scope provides a longitudinal perspective on tourism development trends, regional integration processes, and governance dynamics.

3.3. Data Sources

The data presented herein have been obtained from multiple secondary sources, including:

- The World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI) constitute a comprehensive set of macroeconomic variables, encompassing pivotal indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), tourism receipts, infrastructure investment, and governance indicators.
- The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is a reliable source of data on tourism arrivals, tourism employment, and the sectoral contribution to GDP.
- The World Governance Indicators (WGI) are a set of metrics used to assess governance dimensions such as regulatory quality, political stability, and control of corruption.
- The African Development Bank (AfDB) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) statistical reports constitute a valuable source of data on regional integration indices, infrastructure performance metrics, and digital inclusion indicators.
- The Global Competitiveness Index (World Economic Forum) is a tool employed for the evaluation of competitiveness in infrastructure, ICT readiness, and the business environment.

Furthermore, a range of relevant data were sourced from academic studies, government white papers and regional policy documents in order to provide contextual information for the findings.

3.4. Analytical Framework

The study employs an integrated analytical framework informed by three theoretical lenses: political economy, institutional economics, and destination competitiveness. These are operationalized through four core pillars:

- The Infrastructure and Connectivity Index is a composite indicator that encompasses various aspects of infrastructure and logistics performance. Specifically, it includes metrics such as road and air transport efficiency, as well as border efficiency.
- The Governance and Institutional Quality Index (GQI) is a composite indicator that aims to measure voice and accountability, government effectiveness, corruption control, and the rule of law.
- The Digital Readiness Index is a metric used to assess the extent of internet penetration, digital literacy, mobile subscriptions, and the development of ICT policy in a given country or region.
- The Regional Integration Scorecard is a tool used to assess the degree of economic integration within a particular region. It is based on indicators provided by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Development Bank (AfDB), which are used to evaluate various aspects of regional integration, including trade openness, visa policies, cross-border cooperation, and the harmonization of tourism policies.

The indices are then normalized using z-scores and subjected to principal component analysis (PCA), a technique employed to reduce dimensionality and identify key explanatory factors.

3.5. Econometric Model Specification

In order to test the relationship between enabling factors and tourism outcomes, the study employs a panel data regression model using fixed effects and robust standard errors in order to control for unobserved heterogeneity. The baseline model is specified as follows:

$$\text{TourismDev}_{\{it\}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Infra}_{\{it\}} + \beta_2 \text{GovQual}_{\{it\}} + \beta_3 \text{Digital}_{\{it\}} + \beta_4 \text{RegionInt}_{\{it\}} + \mu_i + \varepsilon_{\{it\}}$$

where:

$\text{TourismDev}_{\{it\}}$ = tourism development index for country i in year t (proxied by tourism receipts per capita, international arrivals, and employment share);

$\text{Infra}_{\{it\}}$ = infrastructure and connectivity score;

$\text{GovQual}_{\{it\}}$ = governance quality indicator;

$\text{Digital}_{\{it\}}$ = digital readiness score;

$\text{RegionInt}_{\{it\}}$ = regional integration indicator;

μ_i = country fixed effects;

$\varepsilon_{\{it\}}$ = error term

Interaction terms are also introduced to test moderating effects, for example, to ascertain whether governance quality moderates the effect of infrastructure investment on tourism outcomes.

3.6. Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)

In order to provide a more comprehensive analysis, a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) was conducted. This analysis was based on country case studies from Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, and Cape Verde. These countries were selected based on their relative tourism performance and diversity in governance and integration models. The purpose of this examination is to identify:

(i) institutional coordination in tourism policy implementation; (ii) the role of digital platforms and marketing strategies; and (iii) lessons from bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the development of regional tourism circuits.

3.7. Validity, Reliability, and Limitations

To ensure validity and reliability, triangulation was used across data sources, and all quantitative models were tested for multicollinearity, autocorrelation, and heteroskedasticity. However, the study acknowledges certain limitations:

- Data gaps and inconsistencies across national statistical systems;
- Difficulty in isolating causality due to the observational nature of the study;
- Limited availability of disaggregated data on domestic vs. international tourism flows.

Despite these constraints, the methodology provides a robust platform for understanding the complex, multi-level dynamics that shape tourism development in West Africa.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Descriptive Trends in Tourism Development Across West Africa

An analysis of the descriptive statistics of tourism indicators across the 15 ECOWAS countries from 2010 to 2023 reveals a mixed but generally underperforming sector. It is evident that countries such as Cabo Verde, Senegal, Ghana, and The Gambia have demonstrated a consistent capacity to outperform regional averages with regard to tourism receipts, international arrivals, and tourism-related employment. This phenomenon can be attributed, in no small part, to the

presence of more stable political environments, targeted investments in infrastructure, and proactive marketing strategies. Conversely, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea-Bissau persist at the lower end of the spectrum, constrained by insecurity, weak governance, and underdeveloped tourism products.

A general upward trend in arrivals and tourism GDP share was observed from 2010 to 2019. This was subsequently interrupted abruptly by the advent of the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus in 2020, with a partial recovery being noted in 2022–2023. The variation in recovery speed can be attributed to differences in digital readiness and institutional response capacity.

4.2. Econometric Results: Key Determinants of Tourism Development

The fixed-effects regression results reported in Table 1 confirm the significance of the four enabling pillars. The following key findings are presented:

- **Infrastructure and Connectivity ($\beta_1 = 0.271$, $p < 0.01$):** Investments in transportation infrastructure, particularly in air connectivity and cross-border road networks, have been demonstrated to have the strongest direct positive effect on tourism development. The existence of modern airports and well-maintained air corridors has been demonstrated to be a significant factor in the increase of tourist flows, as evidenced by the examples of Senegal and Ghana.
- **Governance Quality ($\beta_2 = 0.213$, $p < 0.05$):** The correlation between enhanced governance, as indicated by regulatory quality, political stability, and anti-corruption efforts, and superior tourism outcomes was found to be statistically significant. The interaction terms revealed that governance quality amplified the positive effect of infrastructure, suggesting that without institutional integrity, physical investments do not translate efficiently into outcomes.
- **Digital Readiness ($\beta_3 = 0.196$, $p < 0.05$):** It has been demonstrated that nations with higher internet penetration, digital tourism platforms, and mobile-based booking services have exhibited stronger performance in attracting both domestic and international tourists. It is evident that early investments in digital tourism systems have yielded notable benefits for Cabo Verde and Ghana.
- **Regional Integration ($\beta_4 = 0.178$, $p < 0.10$):** The implementation of regional integration measures, including harmonized visa regimes and joint tourism corridors, yielded a positive yet less pronounced direct effect. This finding suggests that while regionalism is currently in a state of underdevelopment, it nevertheless harbors latent potential.

The overall model demonstrated a high degree of explanatory power, with 67% of the variation in tourism development outcomes being explained ($R^2 = 0.67$), thus indicating a strong fit.

4.3. Moderating Role of Governance: Evidence of Institutional Mediation

The incorporation of interaction terms indicated that governance quality serves as a moderating factor in the impact of both infrastructure and digital readiness. To elaborate further:

- In nations characterized by strong governance structures (for example, Ghana and Senegal), infrastructure investment has been demonstrated to yield a higher marginal return on tourism receipts when compared to those observed in nations with weaker governance structures.
- In contexts where digital literacy is high yet governance is deficient, the advantages accruing from digital transformation (e.g., online tourism marketing) are partly negated by trust deficits and regulatory inconsistencies.

This finding lends support to the institutional economic theory, which posits that institutions are not only enablers but also necessary preconditions for sustainable tourism growth.

4.4. Qualitative Insights from Country Case Studies

The qualitative comparative analysis of Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, and Cabo Verde highlights important country-specific dynamics shaping tourism outcomes. Ghana has successfully aligned tourism promotion with regional diplomacy and national branding initiatives, most notably through the “Year of Return” campaigns, which significantly boosted diaspora tourism. Strong coordination among tourism, culture, and foreign affairs institutions enhanced policy coherence.

Senegal stands out as a regional leader in aviation connectivity and institutional engagement. The Blaise Diagne International Airport functions as a regional hub, supporting ECOWAS tourism mobility, although tourism development remains concentrated in coastal areas.

Nigeria, despite its vast cultural assets and market size, continues to underperform due to governance fragmentation, security challenges, and weak federal–state coordination. These factors undermine the implementation of tourism reforms and investor confidence.

Cabo Verde demonstrates how small states can leverage digital platforms and niche tourism strategies to overcome structural constraints. Proactive bilateral agreements and digital marketing have allowed the country to integrate effectively into global tourism markets despite its geographic isolation.

4.5. Regional Cooperation and Institutional Constraints

Although regional integration exhibits a positive association with tourism development, its comparatively modest coefficient suggests that the potential gains from regionalism remain only partially realized. This outcome reflects implementation gaps rather than conceptual weaknesses in regional cooperation (African Development Bank, 2016). Similar patterns have been observed in other African regional blocs, where formal integration frameworks coexist with limited operational coordination (Byiers *et al.*, 2021; Citaristi, 2022). In the West African context, incomplete harmonization of air transport liberalization under the Yamoussoukro Decision, fragmented visa regimes, and weak coordination among national tourism authorities within ECOWAS continue to constrain cross-border tourism mobility.

Institutional fragmentation at the regional level further limits collective action. The absence of a dedicated ECOWAS tourism coordination mechanism reduces the effectiveness of policy alignment, information sharing, and joint destination marketing. Empirical evidence from regional development studies suggests that without institutional depth and enforcement capacity, regional integration initiatives rarely translate into measurable sectoral outcomes (Sanguinet *et al.*, 2022; World Bank Group, 2021). Consequently, regional tourism integration in West Africa remains more aspirational than operational, reinforcing the need for stronger supranational institutional arrangements.

4.6. Toward a Regionally Anchored Tourism-Led Growth Framework

Consistent with the conceptual framework presented in Figure 2, the empirical findings indicate that tourism development in West Africa is shaped by the interaction between national enabling conditions and regional institutional arrangements. Infrastructure investment, governance quality, and digital readiness exert strong direct effects on tourism outcomes, while their returns are significantly amplified when embedded within coherent regional frameworks. This interaction is consistent with institutional economic theory, which emphasizes that the effectiveness of physical and digital capital is contingent on governance quality and institutional credibility (North, 1990; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012).

These results also support the conceptualization of tourism as a regional public good (Kaul *et al.*, 1999), particularly in integrated economic spaces where mobility, shared infrastructure, and cross-border coordination are essential (Byiers *et al.*, 2021). When regional institutions reduce transaction costs, harmonize policies, and facilitate mobility, tourism systems can achieve economies of scale beyond the reach of individual countries. Conversely, weak institutions dilute these gains, limiting the transformative potential of tourism-led growth (Rodrik, 2023).

Table 1 Panel Regression Results – Determinants of Tourism Development in West Africa (2010–2023)

Dependent variable: Composite Tourism Development Index.

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-Statistic	p-Value	Significance
Infrastructure & Connectivity	0.271	0.058	4.67	0.000	***
Governance Quality	0.213	0.089	2.39	0.018	**
Digital Readiness	0.196	0.073	2.68	0.008	**
Regional Integration	0.178	0.095	1.87	0.063	*
Infrastructure \times Governance	0.114	0.042	2.71	0.007	**
Digital \times Governance	0.098	0.045	2.18	0.030	**
Constant	1.016	0.343	2.96	0.004	**

Source: Author's calculations based on World Bank (WDI), UNWTO, WGI, AfDB and WEF data.

4.7. Model Statistics

The R-squared value for the model is 0.67.

The total number of observations was found to be 195.

The number of countries in question is 15.

The model under consideration is of the fixed effects (country-level) variety.

The robust standard errors are to be clustered at the country level.

The results of the statistical analysis yielded a p-value of less than 0.01, 0.05, or 0.10.

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, p < 0.10

4.8. Interpretation Highlights:

It was determined that infrastructure and connectivity were the most significant direct predictors.

It is evident that the quality of governance exerts a direct impact on the variables under consideration, whilst simultaneously moderating the effect of other variables, most notably infrastructure and digital readiness.

Whilst the phenomenon of regional integration is undoubtedly beneficial, its statistical significance remains negligible. This finding suggests the presence of implementation gaps within the framework of ECOWAS tourism coordination.

The interaction terms demonstrate that in the absence of robust institutions, returns on infrastructure or digital investment are markedly diminished.

5. Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations

The policy implications of this study emphasize the need for multi-level governance in tourism development, combining national reforms with regionally coordinated strategies. Recent evidence from Africa and other developing regions suggests that sectoral growth is most sustainable when policy coherence and institutional alignment are achieved across governance levels (Citaristi, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

5.1. Infrastructure and Connectivity as Regional Public Goods

Infrastructure investment remains a foundational driver of tourism competitiveness. However, its developmental impact increases when infrastructure planning and implementation are coordinated regionally, particularly in transport and border management systems (Citaristi, 2022). Regional transport corridors and air service liberalization can reduce travel costs, expand tourism circuits, and enhance destination accessibility, reinforcing tourism's role in regional integration.

5.2. Governance and Institutional Capacity

Governance quality plays a central role in shaping tourism outcomes and moderating the returns to infrastructure and digital investment. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that transparent regulatory environments and institutional stability enhance tourism investment and performance (Dwyer, 2022; Hall et al., 2021). At the regional level, institutional convergence and peer-learning mechanisms can strengthen policy credibility and implementation capacity across ECOWAS member states.

5.3. Digital Transformation and Innovation

Digital transformation has become increasingly central to tourism competitiveness, particularly in the post-pandemic recovery phase. Digital platforms improve destination visibility, facilitate market access, and enhance operational efficiency (Stankov et al., 2022; UNCTAD, 2023). Regional digital coordination—through shared platforms and interoperable data systems—can further amplify these benefits by supporting integrated tourism services and regional branding initiatives.

5.4. Deepening Regional Integration

The findings indicate that regional integration remains underutilized as a driver of tourism-led growth. Strengthening harmonization in visa regimes, tourism standards, and investment frameworks would facilitate multi-country travel and encourage joint investment. Comparative evidence from the East African Community demonstrates that institutionalized regional tourism coordination can significantly enhance cross-border tourism flows (Citaristi, 2022; World Bank, 2024).

5.5. Inclusive and Resilient Tourism Development

Inclusive tourism strategies that integrate local communities, women, and youth into tourism value chains have been shown to enhance social sustainability and resilience (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021). Furthermore, coordinated regional crisis-response mechanisms—drawing on lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic—can improve the resilience of tourism systems to future shocks (Orianne, 2023; UNWTO, 2022) .

6. Conclusion

Tourism in West Africa occupies a pivotal yet underutilized position within the region's development landscape. While the subregion possesses abundant cultural, natural, and historical assets, the capacity of tourism to function as a sustained engine of economic growth has been constrained by structural bottlenecks, institutional weaknesses, and limited regional coordination. This study set out to examine how tourism-led growth in West Africa can be optimized through a regional political economy and institutional lens, moving beyond fragmented national strategies towards a more integrated development approach.

Drawing on a mixed-methods framework that combined panel econometric analysis, exploratory clustering, and qualitative comparative insights, the study identified four interdependent determinants of tourism performance across ECOWAS countries: infrastructure and connectivity, governance quality, digital readiness, and regional integration. The empirical findings demonstrate that infrastructure investment remains the most influential direct driver of tourism outcomes. However, its effectiveness is critically conditioned by the quality of governance and institutional capacity. In environments characterized by weak institutions, the returns to infrastructure and digital investment are significantly diminished, underscoring the central role of governance as both an enabling and moderating force.

Digital transformation emerged as an increasingly important catalyst for tourism competitiveness, particularly in enhancing market access, destination visibility, and operational efficiency. Nonetheless, digital gains were shown to be contingent on supportive institutional frameworks and regulatory credibility. Regional integration, while currently exerting a modest direct effect, was identified as a latent mechanism with substantial untapped potential. When embedded within coherent supranational institutions, regional coordination can reduce transaction costs, expand tourism circuits, and generate scale economies that individual countries are unable to achieve independently.

The findings of this study advance the conceptualization of tourism as a regional public good within integrated economic spaces such as ECOWAS. Tourism-led growth in West Africa is therefore best understood as a multi-level process in which national reforms and regional institutions are mutually reinforcing. Countries such as Ghana, Senegal, and Cabo Verde illustrate how domestic institutional strengthening, when aligned with regional aspirations, can yield more resilient tourism outcomes. Conversely, contexts marked by institutional fragility and governance fragmentation face persistent challenges in translating tourism potential into sustained development gains.

From a policy perspective, the study underscores the necessity of shifting from short-term promotional interventions towards long-term systemic reforms. Optimizing tourism-led growth in West Africa requires sustained investment in institutional quality, regionally coordinated infrastructure planning, digitally enabled integration, and credible supranational governance mechanisms. When effectively coordinated, tourism has the potential not only to stimulate economic diversification and employment but also to foster regional integration, cultural exchange, and economic resilience across one of Africa's most diverse subregions.

6.1. Implications for future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research on tourism-led growth in West Africa and comparable regional blocs. First, future studies could employ longer time horizons and dynamic panel techniques to explore the temporal evolution of tourism-growth relationships and to better distinguish between short-term shocks and structural transformation effects. Such approaches would enhance causal inference and provide deeper insights into the sustainability of tourism-led development pathways.

Second, given the moderating role of governance identified in this study, further research should explore the micro-level institutional mechanisms through which governance quality shapes tourism outcomes. Integrating political economy analysis with firm-level or destination-level data could illuminate how regulatory credibility, bureaucratic capacity, and stakeholder coordination influence investment decisions and tourism performance.

Third, regional integration warrants closer empirical examination. Future research could investigate the political, administrative, and financial determinants of successful cross-border tourism initiatives, including visa harmonization,

regional branding, and shared digital platforms. Comparative analyses across African regional blocs—such as ECOWAS, the East African Community, and the Southern African Development Community—would be particularly valuable in identifying transferrable institutional lessons.

Finally, greater attention should be given to the inclusivity and resilience dimensions of tourism development. Research that examines how tourism-led growth interacts with social inclusion, conflict dynamics, and climate vulnerability would contribute to a more holistic understanding of tourism's role in sustainable development. Such work would further strengthen the evidence base for designing tourism strategies that are economically viable, socially inclusive, and institutionally robust.

Future research could combine subnational governance indicators, firm-level digital adoption data, and regional integration indices with dynamic panel or spatial econometric methods to identify the joint effects of institutions, digital readiness, and regional coordination on tourism performance.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The author confirms that there are no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed to have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

Statement of Ethical Approval

This study is based exclusively on secondary data obtained from publicly available and reputable institutional sources, including the World Bank, UNWTO, WTTC, and UNCTAD databases. It does not involve human participants, animals, or any form of primary data collection. Therefore, ethical approval was not required for this research. All data sources have been appropriately cited and used in accordance with relevant data use guidelines.

Statement of Informed Consent

This study does not involve human participants or primary data collection. All data were obtained from publicly available secondary sources. Therefore, informed consent was not required for this research.

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