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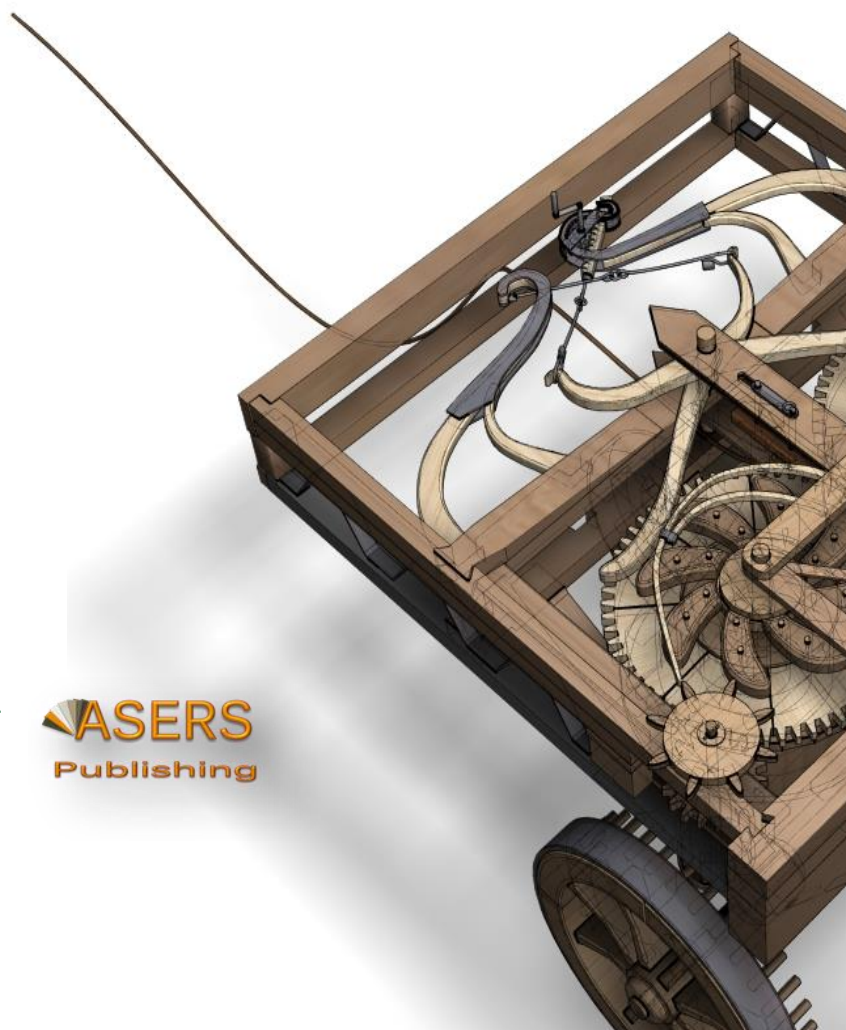
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Table of Contents:

1	Collective Intelligence and Structural Transformation in the Moroccan Tourism Industry during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Field Survey in the Marrakech-Safi Region	1899
	Wijdane MERIOUMI, Bouchra AIBOUD BENCHEKROUN	
2	Navigating the Fine Line of Sustainable Tourism: A Critical Analysis with Implications for Tourism Planning	1908
	Kevin FUCHS	
3	The Contribution of Tourism Industry Cash Flows to Economic Growth “Middle East Evidence”	1915
	Mohammad ALADWAN	
4	The Influence of Halal Attractions and Memorable Experiences on Tourists' Destination Choices: An Indonesian Perspective	1926
	Muaidy YASIN, Lalu Edy HERMAN	
5	The Complexity of the Legal Framework for Regulating the Activity of Tourist Guides in Kosovo	1935
	Armand KRASNIQI, Diamanta SOJEVA, Bekë KUQI	
6	Strategic Planning for Taiwanese Industrial Tourism Parks Themed on Local Characteristic Industries	1942
	Hung-I TAI, Li-Wei LIU, Lung-Shih YANG, Chi-Chiang HSIEH	
7	Tourism and COVID-19: Changes in Travel and Behavioral Patterns of Residents of Bosnia and Herzegovina	1950
	Amra ČAUŠEVIĆ	
8	Land Areas Management for Development of Tourism Different Types	1962
	Aigul SHAIMERDENOVA, Madi NURPEISSOV, Kamshat AKHMETOVA, Valentina GARKUSHINA	
9	Identification of Features for the City Branding: The Case of Shusha City, Azerbaijan as Tourism Destination	1972
	Bahman HUSEYNLI	
10	Strategies for Sustainable Rural Tourism Innovation: Evidence from Hanoi, Vietnam	1984
	Hoa VU DINH, Tuan NGO ANH, Anh NGUYEN THI NGOC, Chi NGUYEN THI	
11	Non-Price Competitiveness Factors in a Value Chain of a Tourism Product	1996
	Mariia GARASYMLIUK, Bohdan DANYLYSHYN, Uliana MARTYNIUK, Viktoriia MAKAROVYCH, OIha POLIVODA, Tetiana NEZVESHCHUK-KOHUT, Nazariy POPADYNETS	
12	State Policy Regulations of Agriculture for Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism	2004
	Baglan AIMURZINA, Shakhman YERTARGYN, Aigul NURMAGANBETOVA, Aina NARYNBAYEVA, Gulzhan ABDRAMANOVA, Zhamilya MIZAMBEKOVA	
13	How Smart Are You at Traveling? Adoption of Smart Tourism Technology in Influencing Visiting Tourism Destinations	2015
	Lusianus KUSDIBYO, Wahyu RAFDINAL, Eko SUSANTO, Rina SUPRINA,	

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14	The Effect of the Dollar, Euro, and Sterling Exchange on the Tourism Index in the Turkish Economy Fariz AHMADOV, Nigar HUSEYNLI, Bahman HUSEYNLI	2029
15	Putting Cities in the Framework of Sustainable Development; Evolution, Evaluation and Features of SDG 11 Ioannis METAXAS, Theodore METAXAS	2039
16	The Transformational Role of Entrepreneurial Universities in Fostering Tourism Sector of Kazakhstan: Legal Documentary Analysis Aigerim BAYANBAYEVA, Dauletkeldi MAKHMADINOV, Nurmukhamed MYRZATAYEV, Gaukhar NIYETALINA, Gulmira NARBAYEVA, Saule SULEIMENOVA, Bakhyt ALTYNBASSOV	2046
17	Demand for Water Tourism by Rafting in the Upper Northeastern Region 1 of Thailand Supreeya WAIYAWET, Sakkarin NONTHAPOT	2056
18	Application of Interactive Media Techniques in Virtual Reality in the Marketing of Tourist Trails in Jordan Ibrahim ALKURDI, Omar A. ALANANZEH, Ranea Mohammed QADDHAT, Lubna S. HAIJAWI, Sami A. ALHASANAT	2066
19	Educational Tourism as a Source of Linguistic and Cultural Competence of Foreign Students on the Example of Azerbaijan Tofik ABDULHASANLI, Gulnara RZAYEVA, Aygun AMIROVA, Zeynab HUSEYNOVA	2077
20	Audit of the Effectiveness of Inter-Budgetary Relations: The Case of Tourism Industry Aigul ALIBEKOVA, Gulmira NASYROVA, Aizhan ZHAMIYEVA, Madina TOLYSBAYEVA, Balsheker ALIBEKOVA, Zhanargul ZHUGUNISSOVA	2083
21	Tourism Development and Local Community Welfare: A Case Study of the Mandalika Special Economic Zone Sri Budi Cantika YULI, Emilia SEPTIANI, Risky Angga PRAMUJA, SUPIANDI, Mohamad NAJMUDIN	2097
22	From Concept to Practice: Implementing Sustainable Tourism Development at Anurak Community Lodge in Thailand Scott SMITH	2107
23	Tourism Potential and the Assessment of Tourist Destinations as Basis for the Tourism Sustainable Development Zhassulan SADYKOV, Rimma TAKHTAYEVA, Larissa NUSSUPOVA, Sharipa NURMUKHAMEDOVA, Zhaxylyk AKIMOV	2117
24	From Decision Making to Practice: Economic Growth on Halal Tourism Policies Based on Sharia Regulation in Lombok, Indonesia M. SYAMSURRIJAL, Achmad NURMANDI, Hasse JUBBA, Mega HIDAYATI, Zuly QODIR, Irwan ABDULLOH	2127
25	Empirical Approaches Regarding Interdependency between Technology and Sustainable Tourism Laura NICOLA-GAVRILĂ	2140
26	The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism Industry of Kazakhstan Dauren BERDIBEKOV, Olga LASHKAREVA, Aigul MAIDYROVA	2148

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Navigating the Fine Line of Sustainable Tourism: A Critical Analysis with Implications for Tourism Planning

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Abstract:

Sustainable tourism has become a hot topic due to the negative impacts of traditional tourism. The concept is designed to balance economic, social, and environmental objectives, but is complex and multifaceted. It has advantages, including the preservation of the environment and cultural heritage, and economic benefits for local communities. However, I contend that sustainable tourism also presents vast challenges such as being difficult to define and measure, being more expensive than traditional forms of tourism (in part), and potentially having negative impacts on local communities. Another major challenge is the lack of incentives for industry players, which makes it hard for stakeholders to embrace sustainable tourism methods and practices. The article concludes that governments must prioritize sustainable tourism initiatives and provide adequate resources and support to ensure their successful implementation.

Keywords: sustainable tourism; challenges; tourism development; tourism incentives; implementation; stakeholders.

JEL Classification: L83; R11; Q01; Q56; Z32; Z38.

Introduction

The tourism industry has become one of the largest and fastest-growing industries in the world, providing significant economic benefits for both host countries and tourists (Fuchs 2021). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), one in every ten dollars was generated directly as a result of tourism. In other words, tourism contributes about ten percent to the global gross domestic product (GDP). However, the rapid expansion of tourism has also led to a range of negative impacts, such as environmental degradation (Shahbaz *et al.* 2021), cultural exploitation (Ferreira da Silva *et al.* 2022), and displacement of local communities (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021). In response to these challenges, the concept of sustainable tourism has emerged as a means of mitigating these negative impacts while providing economic benefits for local communities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Streimikiene *et al.* 2021; Obeidat 2023).

In this article, I will delve into the complexities of sustainable tourism, exploring the opportunities and challenges that accompany this approach to tourism development. Drawing on findings from previous studies, I will critically analyze the benefits and argue for drawbacks of sustainable tourism, providing a comprehensive overview of the issues at play. Through this analysis, I will seek to better understand the fine line between the opportunities and challenges of sustainable tourism and provide insights into the steps to be taken to ensure its success. This critical analysis of the status quo advances the discussion about sustainable tourism, its practices, and its implementation at the intersection of multifaceted stakeholder involvement. The article presents an opportunity to map the issue(s) at hand by highlighting future areas of research that are instrumental for the advancement of the field.

1. Navigating the Fine Line of Sustainable

The renowned theologian Saint Augustine said that “the world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page.” This quote highlights the importance of travel and exploration as well as the valuable perspectives and experiences that they can create. In the context of sustainable tourism, the concept emphasizes the need to preserve the destinations we visit so that they may continue to provide new perspectives and experiences for future generations. Hence, sustainable tourism aims to balance economic, social, and environmental objectives in a way that is sustainable over the long term (Roxas *et al.* 2020a; Scheyvens *et al.* 2021). It seeks to minimize negative impacts, such as environmental degradation and cultural exploitation, while maximizing positive benefits, such as job creation and cultural preservation (Tien *et al.* 2021). Despite the growing interest in sustainable tourism, it remains a complex and multifaceted issue, presenting a range of opportunities and challenges that must be carefully navigated.

2. The Importance of Adopting Sustainable Tourism Practices

Sustainable tourism is an environmentally and culturally friendly approach to travel that is becoming increasingly popular (Chambers 2022). One of its main advantages is that it helps preserve and protect the environment and cultural heritage (Bridgewater & Rotherham 2019). This helps maintain the well-being of local communities, creates economic opportunities and jobs, and ensures the long-term viability of the tourism industry. A study by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) found that sustainable tourism practices, such as reducing energy and water usage and promoting environmentally friendly transportation options, can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and limit the loss of biodiversity (Sharpley 2021). Additionally, sustainable tourism can preserve cultural heritage sites and traditional practices as well as provide significant economic benefits to local communities. Moreover, a study by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) found that sustainable tourism is a catalyst to create jobs, increase income, and promote the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (as cited in Geoffrey Deladem *et al.* 2021).

Ultimately, accessing the status quo provides an opportunity to contribute to a deeper understanding of this important and rapidly evolving field and to provide recommendations for moving forward toward a more sustainable future for tourism. Sustainable tourism has become an emerging and controversial topic in recent years as the negative impacts of traditional tourism on the environment and local communities become more apparent (as similarly argued by Novy & Colomb 2021). Sustainable tourism aims to minimize these negative impacts while maximizing the positive economic, social, and cultural benefits for local communities (Sharpley 2020). The concept of sustainable tourism has been widely discussed, but implementing it in practice is not straightforward (Guo *et al.* 2019). The biggest challenge to implementing sustainable tourism is balancing the often competing interests of different stakeholders (Szromek *et al.* 2021).

3. Sustainable Tourism or Sustaining Tourism?

Sustainable tourism has several advantages, including the preservation and protection of the environment and cultural heritage sites (Roxas *et al.* 2020b). It can provide economic benefits to local communities by creating jobs and supporting local entrepreneurs and artisans (Gica *et al.* 2021). However, sustainable tourism also presents several challenges, such as being difficult to define and measure (Rasoolimanesh *et al.* 2020), being more expensive than traditional forms of tourism (Garg & Pandey 2021), and potentially having such negative impacts on local communities as cultural appropriation (Gertner 2019) and exploitation of local labor (Ioannides *et al.* 2021). Additionally, tourism development can increase competition for resources and services (Streimikiene *et al.* 2021), exacerbating existing socioeconomic inequalities (Rastegar *et al.* 2021).

One of the main challenges in implementing sustainable tourism is the difficulty in defining and measuring it (Rasoolimanesh *et al.* 2020). There is no clear and universally accepted definition of sustainable tourism (Guo *et al.* 2019), which makes it difficult for governments and industry stakeholders to implement sustainable tourism policies and practices. Additionally, there is a lack of agreed-upon methods for measuring the sustainability of tourism, making it challenging to assess the effectiveness of sustainable tourism initiatives (Martínez *et al.* 2019). Sustainable tourism is an increasingly important topic in the travel industry, but it remains a challenging concept to implement in practice. This lack of a clear definition makes it difficult for policymakers to develop and implement effective sustainable tourism policies and for industry players to adopt sustainable tourism practices.

Similarly, Carr *et al.* (2016) argue that despite its widespread use and importance, sustainable tourism has faced several challenges in its implementation, including a lack of clear definition and understanding of the concept. A lack of coordination among different stakeholders, a lack of integration with wider sustainable development goals, and limited engagement with local communities are additional challenges (Carr *et al.* 2016).

To address these challenges and effectively achieve sustainable tourism, more attention should be focused on creating a shared understanding of the concept and improving coordination among stakeholders. Additionally, a stronger emphasis must be placed on the integration of sustainable tourism with broader sustainable development goals stressing the multifaceted inclusion of different stakeholders (*i.e.*, businesses, residents, and tourists).

One of the difficulties involved in implementing sustainable tourism is the absence of incentives for industry players (Licastro & Sergi 2021). Sustainable tourism methods often cost more than traditional tourist activities, making it hard for industry stakeholders to see the direct financial gain from adopting these practices (Musavengane 2019). This lack of incentives presents a challenge in convincing industry stakeholders, especially in highly competitive tourist areas, to embrace sustainable tourism methods. Therefore, the absence of financial incentives creates a barrier to the implementation of sustainable tourism, as industry stakeholders might be more likely to prioritize traditional, more profitable methods that are not environmentally or socially responsible. Furthermore, the absence of incentives can limit the adoption of sustainable tourism practices by smaller businesses and communities that lack the financial resources to invest in these initiatives (Fuchs 2021).

4. Overcoming the Lack of Incentives and Government Support

Implementing sustainable tourism can be a challenging task, especially when it comes to securing the support and resources required from governments (Spenceley 2019). Despite the increasing awareness of the importance of sustainable tourism, many governments continue to prioritize other initiatives and might not allocate enough resources to support sustainable tourism programs (Musavengane 2019; Sheller 2021). This lack of support can make it difficult for stakeholders to adopt and implement sustainable tourism practices. It is not an uncommon phenomenon across many countries for governments to prioritize tourism initiatives that generate more revenue in the short term, even if they are not sustainable. However, this approach is unsustainable in the long run and can have negative impacts on the environment and local communities. To ensure the successful implementation of sustainable tourism, governments must provide adequate resources and support to industry stakeholders and prioritize sustainable tourism initiatives.

The lack of incentives for industry players is a major challenge in implementing sustainable tourism (Streimikiene *et al.* 2021). Compared to traditional tourist activities, sustainable tourism methods usually cost more (Musavengane 2019). Thus, industry stakeholders might have difficulty seeing the direct financial benefits of adopting sustainable tourism practices. This is especially true in highly competitive tourist areas where industry players are looking for ways to maximize their profits. The absence of incentives makes it challenging to convince industry stakeholders to embrace sustainable tourism methods and invest in their implementation (Erol *et al.* 2020). Without proper incentives, industry players might be reluctant to adopt sustainable tourism practices and might instead opt for traditional, more profitable methods that are not environmentally or socially responsible (Delmas *et al.* 2019). This makes it crucial for governments and other organizations to provide incentives that encourage industry players to invest in sustainable tourism practices and help preserve the long-term health of the tourism industry.

The implementation of sustainable tourism also necessitates proper resources and backing from governments (Achmad & Yulianah 2022). Unfortunately, several governments neglect the significance of sustainable tourism initiatives, leading to a lack of resources and support. This makes it difficult to carry out sustainable tourism practices effectively. In some instances, governments even promote traditional forms of tourism that are not sustainable, as these activities have the potential to bring in more short-term revenue. It is vital that governments prioritize sustainable tourism initiatives and provide adequate resources for businesses, as well as support to ensure their successful implementation. Only with the full backing and support of governments can the transition to sustainable tourism practices be successful and sustainable in the long run.

5. Prevailing Against the Challenges of Implementing Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is a vital aspect of the future of the tourism industry and the preservation of local communities and the environment (Pan *et al.* 2018). Despite the challenges in implementing it, efforts must be made to promote and encourage sustainable tourism practices (Pan *et al.* 2018; Higgins-Desbiolles 2020). Traditional forms of tourism have a long history of negative impacts on the environment and local communities, and if these practices continue unchecked, the tourism industry will not be sustainable in the long run. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt sustainable tourism practices to ensure the long-term viability of the industry and the well-being of the environment and local communities. Additionally, promoting sustainable tourism has numerous benefits such as providing economic opportunities for local communities (Sutawa 2012), creating jobs (Ioannides

et al. 2021), and preserving cultural heritage and natural habitats (Kim *et al.* 2019). By implementing sustainable tourism practices, we can ensure a bright future for the tourism industry and the places in which it operates.

Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) highlights the unique challenges that communities face in terms of environmental degradation, social and cultural impacts, and economic viability. Furthermore, she identifies several opportunities for sustainable tourism development in mountain regions, including the promotion of eco-tourism and cultural tourism, the development of infrastructure and local products, and the involvement of local communities in tourism planning and management (Higgins-Desbiolles 2020). Fundamentally and unarguably, sustainable tourism can provide benefits for communities, but careful planning and management are necessary to minimize negative impacts and ensure long-term viability. Promoting eco-tourism and cultural tourism, developing infrastructure and local products, and carefully planning and managing tourism activities to minimize negative impacts is a possible avenue to achieve that outcome.

Implementing sustainable tourism can be a complicated task, but it is crucial to the longevity of the tourism industry, the well-being of local communities, and the protection of the environment (Risteskia *et al.* 2012; Dwyer 2020). Defining and measuring sustainable tourism practices is a challenge in and of itself but coupled with the lack of incentives for industry stakeholders and inadequate resources and support from governments, it can seem like an insurmountable obstacle. Despite these challenges, it is vital to continue working toward a more sustainable tourism industry. The negative impacts that traditional forms of tourism have on the environment and local communities cannot be ignored. With the implementation of sustainable tourism practices, not only can these negative impacts be mitigated, but local communities can benefit from increased economic opportunities, job creation, and the preservation of cultural heritage and natural habitats (Sutawa 2012; Kim *et al.* 2019; Ioannides *et al.* 2021). The tourism industry and the places on which it relies must be protected for the long term, and it is necessary to overcome these challenges to achieve that goal.

A collaborative effort between industry stakeholders, governments, and local communities is necessary to surmount the challenges in implementing sustainable tourism (Khazaei *et al.* 2015; Nguyen *et al.* 2019; Song *et al.* 2021). Industry stakeholders must be incentivized and provided with the required resources to adopt sustainable tourism practices (Pan *et al.* 2018; Spenceley 2019). Governments must prioritize sustainable tourism initiatives and provide adequate support and resources. Local communities must be involved in, and benefit from, sustainable tourism practices to ensure their buy-in and support. Additionally, effective communication and education about the importance of sustainable tourism must be promoted to raise awareness and build consensus. By achieving that all tourism stakeholders are working together, the challenges in implementing sustainable tourism can be overcome, and a sustainable future for the tourism industry and the places on which it relies can be achieved.

Conclusion

Sustainable tourism is necessary for the long-term viability of the tourism industry and the well-being of local communities and the environment. While there are issues in defining and measuring sustainable tourism, it has the potential to deliver significant benefits to both the environment and local communities. To address the negative impacts of tourism, such as cultural appropriation, displacement, and exploitation, it is crucial for governments, industry stakeholders, and tourists to work toward sustainable tourism practices and policies. This may involve implementing policies that prioritize environmental conservation and cultural preservation and promoting sustainable tourism through education and outreach efforts. Furthermore, it is essential to ensure that sustainable tourism practices are accessible and affordable for all so that everyone can participate in and benefit from sustainable tourism. Therefore, I argue that further research is needed at the intersection of stakeholder involvement and how the interests of these different parties can be aligned for the benefit of sustained tourism development.

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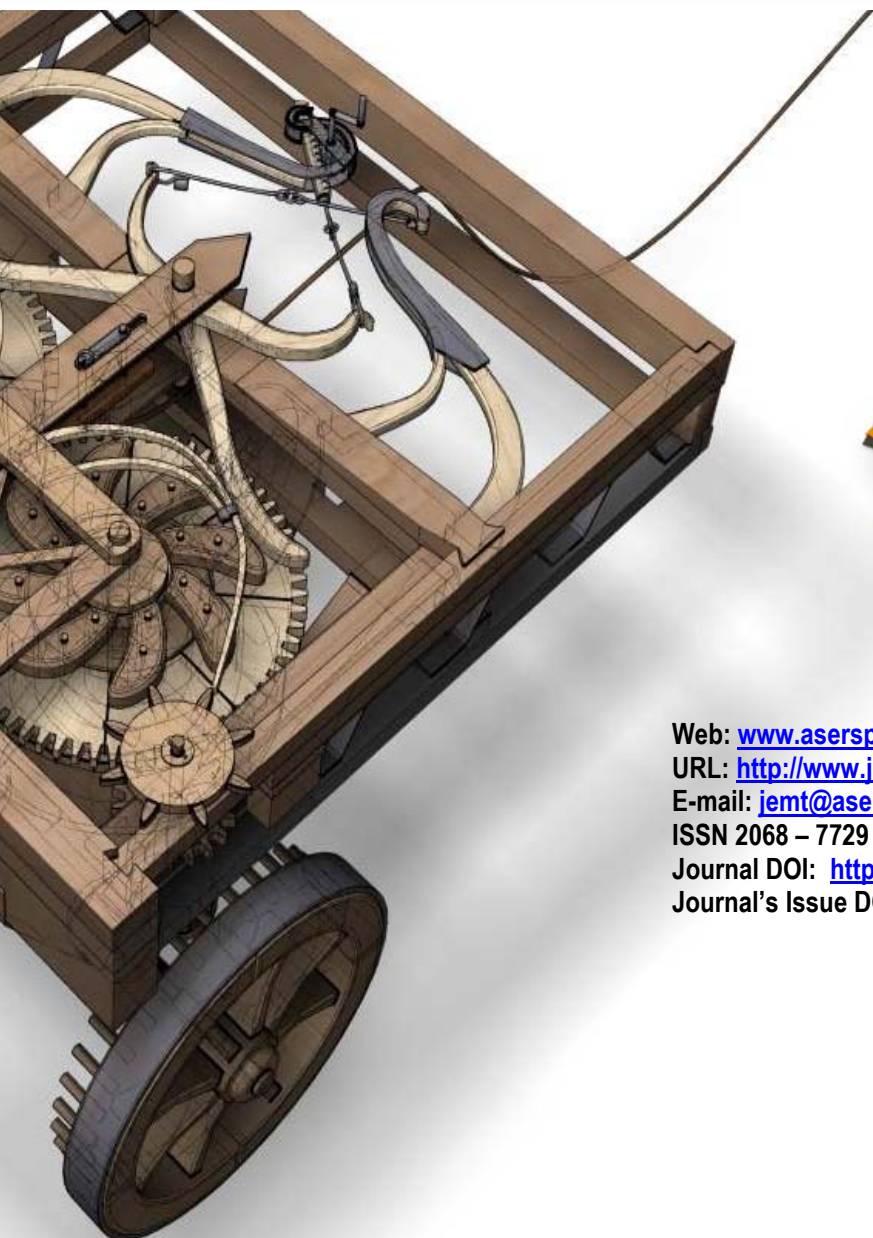
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