

INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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The thesis aims to identify the links between creativity and innovation, on one hand, and the sustainable development of cultural tourism destinations, on the other hand, from the perspective of the actors active in cultural tourism. In this sense, the paper aims to investigate the means through which creativity manifests itself in cultural tourism, develop and validate a conceptual model for the analysis and measurement of innovation in cultural tourism, and analyse the influences that creativity and innovation exert on the sustainable development of cultural tourism destinations.

The research for the thesis was carried out as the current society continues its current transition from mass tourism to experience-based tourism. In these conditions, tourist destinations are facing the need to create competitive advantages based on differentiation that will allow them to satisfy tourists' increasingly complex expectations. In turn, differentiation depends on the ability of destinations and stakeholders within them to create and innovate. This capability is especially important for cultural tourism destinations, whose existence depends on exploiting resources vulnerable to external factors, such as the development of tourism activities. In the paper, the author demonstrates that innovation and creative behaviour are viable means for stimulating the sustainable development of cultural tourism destinations. In this process, the researcher investigates the means through which creativity and innovation manifest themselves in tourism and builds a theoretical framework for the analysis of innovation at tourist destination level, taking into consideration the peculiar characteristics of the tertiary sector which has long been considered little innovative.

The thesis reveals the fundamental contribution of creative thinking to the development the contemporary society. Creativity - previously associated only with the artistic field - is now recognized as an intrinsic characteristic of a multitude of sectors, generally known as "creative industries". The author provides a conceptual analysis of creative industries, discussing both their evolution and their impact on society, which involves contribution to economic growth, creating jobs and generating knowledge benefits for the whole society. The analysis of the current state of knowledge indicates that the entire society has been taking a "creative turn" in various fields such as economic and social development, public policy, education, architecture, science and research. The attribute of "creative" is, in fact, also associated with tourism, with creative tourism being considered a form of cultural tourism and a means to ensure a better valorisation of the intangible heritage. Moreover, the results of the research show that creative tourism is characterised by a continuous expansion and involves the active participation of tourists in authentic experiences, leading to the development of the tourists' creative potential as well as of their personal and professional skills.

The paper also shows that although tourism is considered a medium-innovative industry, the innovation potential of tourism businesses is significant and may be a source of competitive advantage for both economic operators and tourist destinations. Moreover, innovation in tourism can exert a considerable impact on the sustainable development of tourist destinations, affecting all three dimensions of sustainability – economic growth, social development and the protection and conservation of the environment. However, in the absence of relevant tools to quantify innovation among actors in the tourism industry – both in terms of inputs (which reveal the capacity of tourist destination to innovate) and in terms of outputs (which reveal the results of innovation at territorial level) – entities responsible for destination management and other actors with responsibilities in the regulation and development of tourism cannot take informed action to stimulate innovation and to increase the positive impact that innovation exerts on sustainable development.

The author describes how cultural tourism contributes to the social and economic development of society as well as the cultural benefits that tourism brings to that territory in comparison to other forms of tourism. The paper also comprises an analysis of the contribution of cultural events – considered by some authors as social innovation – to the development of tourist destinations, as event tourism – a form of cultural tourism – continues its growth and expansion. Overall, the results point out that in areas that dispose of a rich and varied heritage, cultural tourism remains a viable means to ensure sustainable economic and social development, enabling not only the territory's revitalization but also ensuring the necessary resources for the rehabilitation and conservation of heritage sites, and stimulating inhabitants to maintain their traditional way of life.

The thesis also addresses the issue of tourist destinations' sustainability. The author presents several models used in the analysis of sustainable development in tourism destinations as well as policies, strategies and funding programs targeting the development of cultural tourism destinations at national and European level. The analysis shows the existence among the majority of authors of a consensus that the impact of tourism on sustainable development occurs at three levels: economic, through direct and indirect effects on the local economy, targeting both revenue growth at the community level as well as income distribution (1); social through effects on the quality of life at local level (2); and environmental, through actions that modify the natural balance of the environment (3).

In what regards the results of the empirical research, they pose a number practical implications for the public and private organizations involved in developing and promoting cultural tourism. First, the paper revealed the profile of the main categories of stakeholders operating in cultural tourism destinations: destination management organizations, tourism operators, cultural events organizers. A result which the author considers of major importance for the current state of knowledge is that civil society plays an increasingly important role in cultural tourism; in fact, there are many cases where NGOs have assumed the role of tour operators, cultural events organizers and destination management organizations even in the absence of formally-designated structures. Research has shown that these organizations voluntarily take on the functions normally associated with destination management organizations, even if local, regional or national authorities do not recognize them as such. However, these non-governmental organizations are recognized as leaders at destination level by other market players (tour operators, event organizers, businesses in other sectors), exerting an impact on tourism development by setting a relevant personal example.

The paper also reveals that the creative process directly depends on the organisation's ability to combine its resources in a new way, and to find new solutions to current problems or challenges. A creative tourism product is one that involves a knowledge experience. A creative destination is almost always characterised by its own brand, which sets it apart from the many other destinations in the market; this brand implies, first of all, the development of a visual identity built on local cultural values and based on authenticity. Cultural events are also seen as a dimension of creativity, especially when targeting a specific topic.

Innovation is perceived as a transfer of new and valuable knowledge from the destination to consumers through service providers/tour operators. Basically, tour operators accumulate knowledge (work experience and expertise) on the destination and its resources, "pack it" into a new and attractive form that is later transferred to tourists as a knowledge experience that the visitor would otherwise not have access to. Not every transfer of knowledge translates into innovation, since the capacity to innovate requires the existence of rare knowledge, which other market participants still do not possess. This hypothesis is consistent with Sternberg's investment theory (2006), which associates creativity and innovation with the ability to harness the ideas that a person or entity has obtained previously.

The research indicates the existence of three major categories of innovations: product innovations, process innovations or organisational innovations. Product innovations involve new services on the Romanian market (e.g. creative writing workshops for people working in creative industries), itineraries that contain unusual combinations of attractions, themed products and itineraries (e.g. tours to wineries and nobility mansions) and products that include or are based on thematic events (e.g. the "Festive Transylvania" tour, involving visits to several castles in the premises of which festivals are organised). A distinction between product and process innovations can be difficult to make

since both categories are characterised by a high degree novelty. What is an innovative product for an organization (e.g. a hotel management system can be a product innovation for the IT developer who produces it) can become a process innovation to another organization (the hotel which implements the system). However, a product that is not necessarily new to the market (e.g. tours to various craftsmen's workshops) can be a process innovation, in the interviewees' opinion, if used as a means to solve an economic or social problems (reducing dependence on guaranteed minimum income of the Roma population).

Last but not least, the thesis reveals that innovation leads to strengthening and multiplying the impact of tourism on sustainable development by increasing the intensity with which certain processes are carried out: extending access to utility networks (for example, by setting up a water treatment plant based an innovative concept), social integration of people belonging to vulnerable groups (developing innovative products and services that create jobs for people exposed to social exclusion) or integrating previously unused heritage buildings in the economic circuit (by developing thematic cultural routes and cultural events).