CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN DOMESTIC TOURISM

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE

17 March 2026
Sofia, Bulgaria

АВАНГАРД ПРИМА

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN DOMESTIC TOURISM

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OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE

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CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN DOMESTIC TOURISM

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

COMMITTEES

Organizing Committee

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PROGRAM

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE
"CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN DOMESTIC TOURISM"
17 MARCH 2026 - SOFIA, BULGARIA

HOUR	PROGRAM
11:00 – 11:30	**Official opening of the conference** *https://meet.google.com/kgo-sphn-iwu* Welcome speech by the Director of NIGGG-BAS Corresponding member Prof. DSc Nikolay Miloshev Presentation of the project results by Assoc. Prof. PhD Desislava Varadzhakova - project manager
11:30 – 15:00	**Work on session 1** *https://meet.google.com/zgp-edhb-zkg*
11:30 – 15:00	**Work on session 2** *https://meet.google.com/jmm-frdy-qwt*
15:00 – 18:30	**Work on session 3** *https://meet.google.com/rwb-zdtr-wqf*
***Note 1**: The indicated hours in the program are local time of the organizers (Sofia, Bulgaria) – Currently Eastern European Time (EET), UTC +2.* ***Note 2**: Each session ends with a discussion regarding domestic tourism.*	

SESSION 1	
Moderators: Desislava Poleganova, Yulian Totev - PhD students	
Note 1: *The indicated hours in the program are local time of the organizers (Sofia, Bulgaria) – Currently EasternEuropean Time (EET), UTC +2.*	
Hour	**Program**
11:30 – 11:40	**MODERN TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOMESTIC TOURISM PROCESSES ON THE EXAMPLE OF GEORGIA** ***Nino Dokhturishvili -*** *Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia*
11:40 – 11:50	**DOMESTIC TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD IN GEORGIA: STATISTICAL ANALYSIS** ***Nino Abesadze, Otar Abesadze -*** *Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia*
11:50 – 12:00	**DOMESTIC WELLNESS TOURISM IN *GEORGIA*** ***Ana Abesadze*** *- Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia*
12:00 – 12:10	**FISCAL LEVERS FOR RESILIENT DOMESTIC TOURISM: REDUCED VAT, LOCAL TOURIST TAXES AND EU STATE-AID CONSTRAINTS WITH COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS FROM ITALY AND BULGARIA** ***Filippo Luigi Giambrone****- Uni Salzburg–Uni Bari, Italy*
12:10 – 12:20	**MANAGING ACCESSIBILITY IN URBAN DESTINATIONS: POLICY FRAMEWORK AND INSIGHTS FROM SOFIA** ***Stelena Angelova*** *- Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria*
12:20 – 12:30	**FROM REGULATION TO MARKET TRANSFORMATION: NON-HOTEL ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES AFTER THE 2025 LEGISLATIVE CHANGES** ***Giuseppe Napoli, Benedetta Pagnotta -*** *University of Sannio of Benevento – Italy*
12:30 – 12:40	**DISCURSIVE SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM: AGENCY AND PERCEPTION ACROSS DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS** ***Renzo Mocini -*** *Sapienza University of Rome, Italy*
12:40 – 12:50	**STRATEGIC FINANCIAL PLANNING AND FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN DOMESTIC TOURISM: A LITERATURE REVIEW** ***Mesut Atasever, Ercan Özen*** *-University of Uşak, Türkiye*
12:50 – 13:00	**MACROECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF BULGARIA'S TOURISM SECTOR: AN ARDL ANALYSIS** ***Erdoğan Kotil, Fatih Konur -*** *Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University, Turkiye*
13:00 – 13:10	**DIGITAL STORYTELLING OF SACRED HERITAGE: A STRATEGY TO ATTRACT YOUNG DOMESTIC TOURISTS** ***Mohinur Kurbanova -*** *Bukhara State University, Uzbekistan*
13:10 – 13:20	**GOVERNING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM THROUGH SOFT LAW: UN TOURISM'S INSTITUTIONAL ROLE AND THE "CINQUE TERRE" MODE** ***Anna Bacco*** *- University of Salerno, Italy*
13:20 – 13:40	**OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES OF SLOVENIAN HOTELS OUTSIDE THE PEAK SEASON** ***Milenko Gajić*** *- BIC Higher Vocational College, Slovenia*

13:40 – 13:50	**PROSPECTS AND PERILS: THE DUAL REALITY OF DOMESTIC TOURISM CONSUMPTION IN GHANA'S REMOTE WORK ERA –** ***Adriana Narkwa Anderson, Victor Anderson Hodibert, Joseph Ackon -*** *Takoradi Technical University, Ghana*
13:50 – 14:00	**ORAL HERITAGE TOURISM AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INDIRECT SOCIAL PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS: A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA** ***Mihail Ciobanu*** *- National Institute for Economic Research of the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova*
14:00 – 14:10	**RESEARCH ABOUT TOURIST-TO-TOURIST INTERACTION AND PROSOCIALITY ON EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM** ***Casandra-Mariana Mănica -*** *Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania*
14:10 – 14:20	**SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL REGIONS** ***Gergana Arshinkova*** *- Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria*
14:20- 14:30	**PODCASTING FOR TOURISM: A NEW KIND OF TRAVEL GUIDE** ***Luigi Umberto Rossetti -*** *University of Sannio in Benevento, Italy*
DISCUSSION	

SESSION 2	
Moderator: Marina Raykova -PhD student	
Note 1: *The indicated hours in the program are local time of the organizers (Sofia, Bulgaria) – Currently EasternEuropean Time (EET), UTC +2.*	
Hour	**Program**
11:30 – 11:40	**ACCESSIBLE TOURISM: SOME RECENT ITALIAN EXPERIENCES** ***Guido Migliaccio*** *- University of Sannio of Benevento – Italy;* ***Vittorio Lepre*** *- Social Cooperative Society, Naples – Italy*
11:40 – 11:50	**DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE ORGANIZATION OF WORLD SPORTING EVENTS IN HUNGARYHOW SIGNIFICANT IS SUSTAINABILITY IN DESTINATION RESTAURANTS?** ***Judit Grotte -*** *Kodolányi University, Budapest,* ***Borbála Gondos -*** *EDUTUS University, Budapest, Hungary*
11:50 – 12:00	**TOURISM AND SHORT-STAY FACILITIES IN EUROPE: ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS ASPECTS** ***Guido Migliaccio, Mirko Mozzillo*** *- University of Sannio of Benevento – Italy*
12:00 – 12:10	**TOURISM AND INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY: SOME CONSIDERATIONS** ***Sabrina Lucilla Barone*** *- Unipegaso Telematic University, Naples, Italy*
12:10 – 12:20	**MOTIVATIONS FOR TRAVEL AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN ALGERIA** ***Chems Eddine Boukhedimi –*** *University of Tizi-Ouzou, Algeria*
12:20 – 12:30	**DOMESTIC TOURISM AT KOKINO ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATORY: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF INTERPRETATIVE PANELS** ***Ivana Manevska*** *- University of Novi Sad, Serbia* ***Simona Jovanović*** *- Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, North Macedonia*

12:30 – 12:40	**EMPLOYEES' AWARENESS OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND FOOD WASTE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN THE HOSPITALITY SECTOR OF THE AUTONOMOUS PROVINCE OF VOJVODINA** ***Nemanja Lakić, Vesna Vujasinović, Snježana Gagić Jaraković, Jovana Bajkanović*** *- University of Novi Sad, Serbia*
12:40 – 12:50	**UNLOCKING TOURIST POTENTIAL: PUBLIC INSIGHTS AND PERSONAL CONTIBUTIONS OF BANJA LUKA RESIDENTS** ***Marija Vukadin Milojević, Svetlana Tepavac, Igor Stamenković*** *- University of Novi Sad, Serbia*
12:50 – 13:00	**DETERMINANTS OF HOTEL EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION OF CSR - EVIDENCE FROM NOVI SAD, SERBIA** ***Ivana Šagovnović, Maja Mijatov Ladičorbić, Milena Nedeljković Knežević*** *- University of Novi Sad, Serbia*
13:00 – 13:10	**IMPLEMENTING ZERO WASTE IN HOSPITALITY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM** ***Milana Čugalj, Jovana Čugalj, Saveta Bikić, Vesna Vujasinović*** *- University of Novi Sad, Serbia*
13:10 – 13:20	**TOURISM COMPETITIVENESS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BASED ON THE TRAVEL & TOURISM DEVELOPMENT INDEX** ***Vladimir Radivojević*** *- University of Priština in Kosovska Mitrovica, Serbia*
13:20 – 13:40	**MEDICAL TOURISM IN SLOVENIA - RECOVERY AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE POST-COVID ERA** ***Barbara Urh -*** *Secondary School of Nursing Ljubljana, Slovenia*
13:40 – 13:50	**DOMESTIC LEISURE TOURISM IN SOUTH CENTRAL REGION IN BULGARIA: PUBLIC ATTITUDES AND PERSPECTIVES** ***Marina Raykova -*** *National institute of Geophysics, Geodesy and Geography at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences*
13:50 – 14:00	**INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE AS A RESOURCE FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE CITY OF ZAJEČAR** ***Maja Simonović Stojčić, Lenka Istijanović, Miodrag Velojić*** *(Independent Researcher)****, Tatjana Pivac*** *– University of Novi Sad, Serbia*
14:00 – 14:10	**PROJECT-BASED LEARNING ON SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: STRENGTHENING THE PANCASILA STUDENT PROFILE IN INDONESIAN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS** ***Andreas Suwandi, Cica Yulia, Ade Gaffar Abdullah, Isma Widiaty, Ulin Nahar -*** *Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia*
14:10 – 14:20	**THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE TOURISM: BETWEEN CRITICAL ISSUES AND PROSPECTS, A GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL** ***Angela Miccio -*** *University of Naples "Federico II", Naples, Italy*
14:20 – 14:30	**THE POTENTIAL OF HUMAN RESOURCES IN THE HORECA SECTOR FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM /THE CASE OF BULGARIA/** ***Olga Mancheva-Ali, Venelina Tsanevska -*** *University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria*
DISCUSSION	

SESSION 3	
Moderators: Assoc. prof. PhD Adriana Brambilla, Assoc. prof. Desislava Varadzhakova	
Note 1: The indicated hours in the program are local time of the organizers (Sofia, Bulgaria) – Currently Eastern European Time (EET), UTC +2.	
Hour	**Program**
15:00 – 15:10	**TOURISM, LANDSCAPE COMMODIFICATION AND GEOCONSERVATION: THE TANDIL CASE, ARGENTINA - *Gonzalo Schneider, Jorge Lapena -*** *Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina*
15:10 – 15:20	**CHALLENGES OF ACADEMIC MOBILITY IN BRAZILIAN DOMESTIC TOURISM: TRAVEL THE JOURNEY TO THE ANPTUR 2026 SEMINAR IN MACAPÁ (AP)** ***Cláudia Araújo de Menezes Gonçalves Martins -*** *Universidade do Estado do Amazonas,* ***Priscila Fernandes Carvalho de Melo –*** *UFPB,* ***Francinete da Silva Guilherme -*** *GCET – UFPB,* ***Alessandra Souza Queiroz Melo -*** *Universidade Federal do Amazonas; GCET-UFPB, Brazil*
15:20 – 15:30	**BALANCING CONSERVATION AND ATTRACTION: WORLD HERITAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF TOURISM SUPPLY** ***Leylane Meneses Martins*** *- Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil* ***Anderson Soares Lopes*** *- Federal University of São Carlos, Brazil*
15:30 – 15:40	**STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING RESPONSES TO POSITIVE REVIEWS OF THE BEST HOTELS IN THE WORLD RECOGNIZED BY TRIPADVISOR IN 2024 - *Laura Ribeiro Pírez, Cibelle Batista Gondim, Talles Freire de Sá*** *- Federal University of Paraíba, Brazil*
15:40 – 15:50	**DOMESTIC TOURISM AND HERITAGE VALORIZATION: A STUDY OF THE SÃO FRANCISCO CULTURAL CENTER IN JOÃO PESSOA, PARAÍBA - *Ellen Oliveira dos Santos Silva, Adriana Brambilla, Aline Gisele Azevedo Lima de Barros, Marcleide Maria Macêdo Pederneiras*** *- Federal University of Paraíba, Brazil*
15:50 – 16:00	**TOURISM AND OLDER ADULTS: ACCESSIBILITY IN ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES IN AREIA AND BANANEIRAS, PARAÍBA (BRAZIL)** ***Maria Luiza Batista Henrique da Silva, Adriana Brambilla*** *– UFPB,* ***Elídio Vanzella*** *- Enber e GCET, Brasil*
16:00 – 16:10	**SANTA CRUZ CABRÁLIA: CHALLENGES IN ENHANCING THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE WITH LIMITED INFRASTRUCTURE** ***Jerusa Ribeiro Pires de Brandão e Silva, Amanda Raquel de França Filgueiras D Amorim, Elídio Vanzella –*** *Ivy Enber Cristhian University, Brasil*
16:10 – 16:20	**PERFORMANCE INDICATORS IN LODGING: OPERATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR SERVICE EXCELLENCE** ***Fabiana Saldanha de Valmont, Marcleide Maria Macêdo Pederneiras, Paula Dutra Leão de Menezes, Márcia Félix da Silva, Adriana Brambilla, Joacilda da Conceição Nunes, Luciane Spinelli de F. Pessoa –*** *UFPB-Brasil*
16:20 – 16:30	**ACCESSIBILITY IN TOURISM FOR OLDER ADULTS: A STUDY OF BARS, RESTAURANTS, AND TOURIST ATTRACTIONS IN AREIA AND BANANEIRAS (Paraíba, Brazil) - *Felipe Chagas*** *- UFPB,* ***Adriana Brambilla*** *- UFPB e GCET,* ***Elídio Vanzella*** *- Enber e GCET, Brazil*
16:30 – 16:40	**BETWEEN THE SACRED AND DEVELOPMENT: RELIGIOUS TOURISM FROM A DESTINATION MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE IN RIO GRANDE DO SUL - *Izabel Cristine Lopes, Elídio Vanzella*** *- Ivy Enber Christian University, Brasil*

16:40 – 16:50	**BETWEEN GLASSES AND LANDSCAPES: THE IMPACT OF WINERIES ON TOURISM RECONFIGURATION IN MORRO DO CHAPÉU, BA** ***Simone Neto de Santana Oliveira, Adriana Brambilla, Elídio Vanzella,*** *GCET*
16:50 – 17:00	**CONVERGENCE BETWEEN CINEMA, GASTRONOMY, AND TOURISM: PROPOSAL FOR GASTRONOMIC CINEMATOGRAPHIC TOURISM AS A NICHE MARKET -** ***Priscila Melo*** *- Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil*
17:00 – 17:10	***DEVELOPMENT OF TOURIST CIRCUITS IN THE CONTEXT OF FILM TOURISM: LITERATURE REVIEW*** ***Luís Souza, Priscila Melo*** *- Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil*
17:10 – 17:20	***TOURISM AND CINEMA: BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST THREE DECADES OF SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION*** ***Priscila Fernandes Carvalho de Melo, Nathália Korossy*** *- Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil*
17:20 – 17:30	**RESEARCH IN TOURISM AND HOTEL INDUSTRY: ANALYSIS OF THE SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION OF THE PROFESSORS OF A BRAZILIAN FEDERAL UNIVERSITY (2019-2023)** ***Cybele Brandão Santos, Paula Dutra Leão de Menezes, Marcleide Maria Macêdo Pederneiras, Márcia Félix da Silva*** *- Federal University of Paraíba, Brazil*
17:30 – 17:40	**FACULTY ENGAGEMENT IN TOURISM HIGHER EDUCATION: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW** ***João Vitor Santos da Silva, Sérgio Rodrigues Leal -*** *Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil*
17:40 – 17:50	**SMART TOURISM DESTINATIONS: THE ROLE OF DATA INTELLIGENCE IN RECONFIGURING LOCAL TOURISM** ***Marília Paes-Cesário*** *- IFPB/GCET,* ***Leylane Meneses Martins*** *- UFRN/GCET,* ***Thyago Albuquerque*** *-URCA/GCET*
17:50 – 18:00	**BRAZILIAN AUDIOVISUAL POLICIES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH FILM-INDUCED TOURISM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE HIGHEST GROSSING PRODUCTIONS BETWEEN 2001 AND 2021** ***Priscila Melo*** *-UFPE, Brazil,* ***Alessandra Melo*** *- UFAM, Brazil*
18:00 – 18:10	**TOURISM AND BASIC SANITATION: AN ANALYSIS IN PIRENÓPOLIS, GOIÁS, BRAZIL** *-* ***Ailson da Silva Fernandes*** *- IESA/UFG,* ***Amanda Sueli Madeira Pereira*** *- UEG,* ***Samuel Ribeiro dos Santos-****IFSUDESTE MG,* ***Daiko Lima e Silva*** *- UDESC,* ***Felipe Gomes do Nascimento*** *– UNESPAR, Brazil*
18:10 – 18:20	**GASTRONOMY AND CULTURAL APPRECIATION OF ARTISANAL CHEESE IN THE AGRESTE REGION OF PERNAMBUCO** ***Maisa Manuelle da Silva, Anália Felix –*** UFPE**;** ***João Neto -*** *UFPB,* ***Alessandra*** **Melo** ***–*** *UFAM,* ***Priscila Melo -*** *UFPE*
18:20 – 18:30	**MULTIPLE LOOKS, MULTIPLE THREADS: UNDERGROUND WIRING WEAVING THE DOMESTIC TOURIST EXPERIENCE OF PIRENÓPOLIS, GOIÁS, BRAZIL** ***Amanda Sueli Madeira Pereira****- UEG,* ***Ailson da Silva Fernandes -*** *IESA/UFG,* ***Divina Aparecida Leonel Lunas Lima, Jean Carlos Vieira Santos*** *UEG, Brazil*
18:30 – 18:40	**WATER QUALITY IN ARAGUACEMA (TO): PHYSICAL-CHEMICAL INDICATORS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF DOMESTIC TOURISM** ***Ailson da Silva Fernandes, Amanda Sueli Madeira Pereira, Débora Chaves Meireles, Diego Neves de Sousa, Marcos Roberto Pisarski Junior***
DISCUSSION	

BULGARIAN DOMESTIC TOURISM: PUBLIC ATTITUDES ANALYSIS

Desislava Varadzhakova[1], Alexander Naydenov[2], Marina Raykova[3], Nikola Naumov[4], Georgi Zhelezov[5], Nadezhda Ilieva[6], Dessislava Poleganova[7], Yulian Totev[8], Aleksandra Ravnachka[9]

***ABSTRACT**: The present paper provides an overview of the work on the project "Modelling and Research of Public Attitudes of Bulgarian Citizens Regarding the Image of Domestic Leisure Tourism: Situational Analysis and Conceptual Framework for Overcoming the Negatives", funded by the Bulgarian National Research Foundation. The research methodology is described, specifically the conduct of a nationally representative survey (NRS) with 1,003 adult respondents (aged 18 and older) who reside permanently in Bulgaria. The main results of the survey reveal various advantages and disadvantages, as well as the different perceptions of Bulgarian citizens of winter and summer tourism in the country and abroad. In conclusion, the main areas in which the project can be useful are highlighted, and the list of papers published within the project scope is attached.*

***KEYWORDS**: project, domestic tourism, attitudes, Bulgaria*

INTRODUCTION

Domestic tourism is a key factor for the sustainable development of countries with rich natural and anthropogenic tourism resources and supports the local economy (Kang et al., 2014; Ragab et al., 2020; Pericleous & Christou, 2023). Its importance has increased, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when, due to the imposed travel bans between countries in the entire world, this type of tourism ensures a sustainable transition of the tourism industry (Naumov et al., 2021; Varadzhakova et al., 2021; Kifworo & Dube, 2023) and the economies of the countries in this crisis (Kvítková et al., 2021; Duro et al., 2022; Boto-García and Mayor, 2022). In Bulgaria, before the pandemic, tourism provided up to 12% of GDP (Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2023). During the health crisis, domestic tourism in the country has seen significant growth. However, in 2021, after the lifting of travel bans, the main destinations for summer sea tourism of Bulgarians – Greece and Turkey – recorded a growth rate of tourists from Bulgaria of over 240% (NSI, 2023). Annually during the summer months, Bulgarians' trips to the above-mentioned destinations amount to about 50% of those in the

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country (NSI, 2023). The lost benefits for Bulgaria can be seen in several areas: lower occupancy of accommodation and catering and entertainment establishments and lower revenues; lower revenues from collected resort fees; fewer opportunities for reinvestment, etc. There is a tendency to direct the tourist flow to competitive destinations in Bulgaria also during the winter months and an outflow of domestic tourism. The observed phenomena have a significant impact on the country's economy, which is why the study of the attitudes of the population and the potential negatives that are reported by it is of essential importance.

In order to overcome the outflow of tourists from domestic to outbound tourism, a scientific approach is needed to study the overall perception of destination Bulgaria among Bulgarian citizens, taking into account the degree of relativity in perceptions, media information that focuses consumer attention on the shortcomings of domestic tourism, and the real advantages of competing tourism destinations. Therefore, it is necessary to study the main factors that influence the decision to practice domestic tourism. The study of public attitudes and their connection with the consumer behaviour of the Bulgarian citizens is a significant factor for the creation of an adequate national strategy for the development of domestic tourism in Bulgaria, for optimizing the offer and changing the image of the country.

The present paper shows a part of the results of the project "Modelling and Research of Public Attitudes of Bulgarian Citizens Regarding the Image of Domestic Leisure Tourism: Situational Analysis and Conceptual Framework for Overcoming the Negatives". They are obtained by the National Representative survey and explained in detail in the Methodology section. The analysis of the project data is promoted in 11 papers in different journals indexed in Scopus and/or Web of Science databases, 2 publications in ERIH+ indexed journals, 11 papers presented in several international conferences (and published in Proceedings books), and 1 monograph. To meet the project goals, an international scientific conference was organized, considering the importance of exchanging good practices in the field of domestic tourism.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was designed to examine the Bulgarian citizens' perceptions, habits, and attitudes toward domestic leisure tourism. The study aims to identify key factors that shape the image of Bulgaria as a tourist destination from the perspective of its own citizens, and to uncover areas where negative perceptions may be addressed through targeted interventions.

The research was conducted through a nationally representative survey (NRS) of 1,003 adult respondents (aged 18 and older) who permanently reside in Bulgaria. The fieldwork took place between April 18 and May 14, 2023, using a face-to-face, tablet-assisted personal interview (TAPI) methodology. The sample was drawn using a two-stage clustered design, stratified by all 28 NUTS 3 Bulgarian districts and by the settlement type. The measuring scales employed include nominal, ordinal, and ratio scales.

RESULTS

This paper presents an analytical summary of the key findings, divided into five thematic areas: general leisure tourism practices, the probability of recommending Bulgaria as a tourist destination, perceived advantages and disadvantages of winter and summer tourism, and the competitive appeal of foreign destinations.

2. General Practices Concerning Leisure Tourism

2.1. Frequency of Travel

The survey reveals that a strong majority of the Bulgarian citizens engage in domestic leisure travel regularly. As shown in Figure 1, over two-thirds of respondents (67.7%) travel for leisure purposes at least once a year, with 36.0% doing so several times a year and 31.7%

once a year. An additional 0.5% report that they travel every month.

At the lower end of the frequency spectrum, 12.7% travel less often than once a year, and 9.8% only travel once every few years. A notable 9.4% of respondents indicated that they do not travel within Bulgaria at all. These figures suggest that while domestic tourism participation is widespread, there is a segment of the population that is either disengaged from or unable to participate domestically in leisure travel.

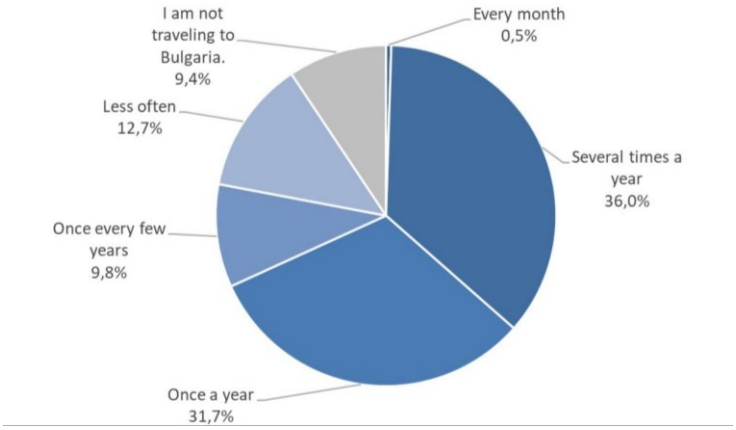

Figure 1. *Frequency of travel for leisure tourism in Bulgaria*

2.2. Ways of Organising a Vacation

When it comes to the organisation of their vacations, Bulgarian leisure tourists rely heavily on personal networks and already exciting experiences. The most prevalent approach, cited by 45.4% of respondents, is visiting only accommodations recommended by friends or where the respondent has previously stayed (Figure 2). This strong reliance on word-of-mouth underscores the importance of trust and personal experience in domestic tourism decision-making.

Online booking platforms (e.g., booking.com, airbnb.com, expedia.com, etc.) are used by 24.6% of respondents, indicating growing but still limited digital adoption among Bulgarian domestic tourists. A further 21.0% prefer to contact the hotel directly. Tour operators play a marginal role and are used by only 6.0% of travellers. The remaining 3.0% use other methods.

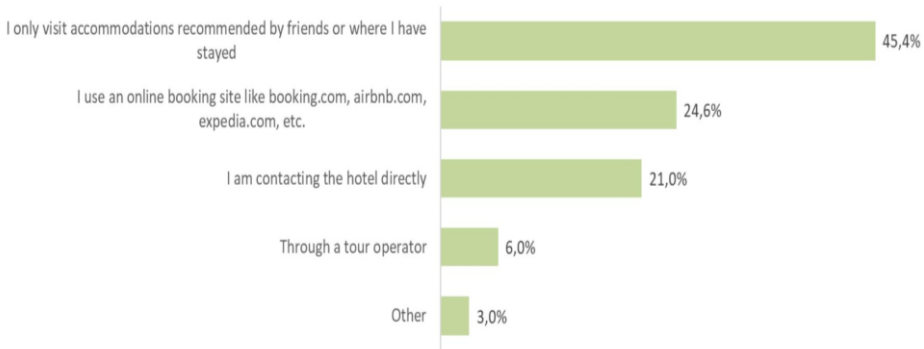

Figure 2. *Ways of organising the vacation*

2.3. Approaches for Choosing Accommodation

The dominance of interpersonal influence is even more pronounced when examining how travellers choose their accommodations. A substantial 60.6% rely on recommendations from friends and acquaintances (Figure 3). This is followed at a considerable distance by the comments on social networks and internet sites (16.3%) and the advertising on social networks and internet sites (9.8%).

The tour operator recommendations account for only 5.6%, while traditional media channels have minimal influence: altogether, billboards and advertising signs (0.5%) and radio/television advertising (0.4%) form less than 1% of respondents. These results highlight that digital word-of-mouth and peer recommendations overwhelmingly drive accommodation choices, while traditional advertising channels have become largely ineffective for this market segment.

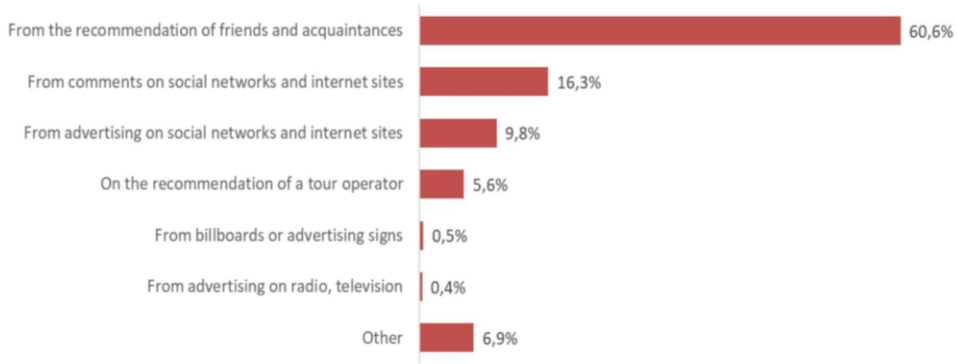

Figure 3. *Approaches for choosing accommodation*

2.4. Transportation modes

The transportation mode for domestic leisure travel is overwhelmingly dominated by private vehicles. A striking 82.0% of the respondents use a personal vehicle (Figure 4), reflecting Bulgaria's car-dependent travel culture and potentially indicating gaps in the public transportation infrastructure connecting tourist destinations.

Bus transport is a distant second at 13.9%, while rail travel accounts for a mere 2.6%. A negligible 0.5% use caravan/camper mode, and other transport modes comprise 1.0%. The extremely low share of train travel is particularly noteworthy, suggesting that the railway network is either insufficiently connected to leisure destinations, unreliable, or perceived as inconvenient by domestic tourists.

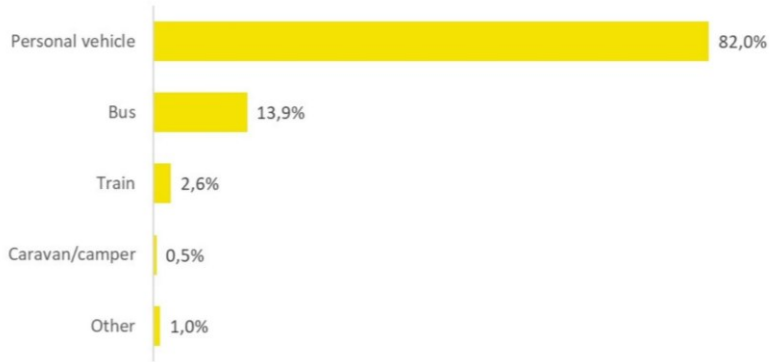

Figure 4. *Transportation mode for leisure purposes*

3. Probability of Recommending Bulgaria as a Tourist Destination

Respondents were asked to rate the probability that they would recommend Bulgaria as a tourist destination on a scale from 0 ("No chance to recommend") to 10 ("I will definitely recommend"). The distribution of responses, presented in Figure 5, reveals a positively skewed pattern with a mean score of 6.80.

The highest concentration of responses falls in the upper range of the scale: 16.7% of respondents gave the maximum rating of 10, 16.6% rated 8, and 15.7% rated 7. Together, scores of 7 and above account for approximately 58.8% of the respondents, indicating that a majority hold a favourable view of Bulgaria as a tourism destination.

However, the distribution also reveals a significant spread. The mid-range scores (5 and 6) collectively account for 26.2%, while the lower range (0–4) represents approximately 15.2% of respondents. The relatively moderate mean of 6.80 on a 10-point scale suggests that there is meaningful room for improvement, while Bulgaria possess generally positive perceptions. The presence of detractors (scores 0–6, accounting for over 41% of respondents using a Net Promoter Score framework) indicates that specific grievances and negative perceptions are preventing a stronger endorsement of domestic tourism.

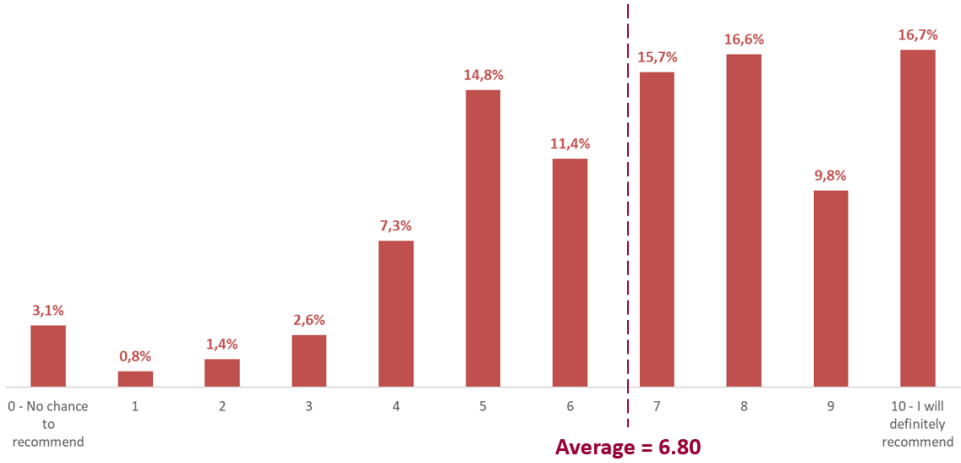

Figure 5. *Probability of recommending Bulgaria as a tourist destination*

4. Winter Leisure Tourism

4.1. Perceived Advantages

When asked about the main advantages of winter leisure tourism in Bulgaria, respondents most frequently cited attractive natural resources (45.9%), as shown in Figure 6. In second place, in terms of importance, are the opportunities to practice different types of tourism (18.5%), the short distances from residence to winter leisure tourism places (16.1%), good accommodation (13.9%), and suitable facilities for enjoying winter sports (13.0%).

Attractive prices were mentioned by only 7.4%, while good opportunities for entertainment, celebration, and dating accounted for 6.7%. The familiarity of the domestic environment and absence of a language barrier were cited by 4.8%. Quality service (2.7%), security and safety (1.4%), and good road network (1.3%) received only marginal mentions. A notable 16.7% of respondents could not estimate or did not know, suggesting a degree of unfamiliarity with winter tourism offerings.

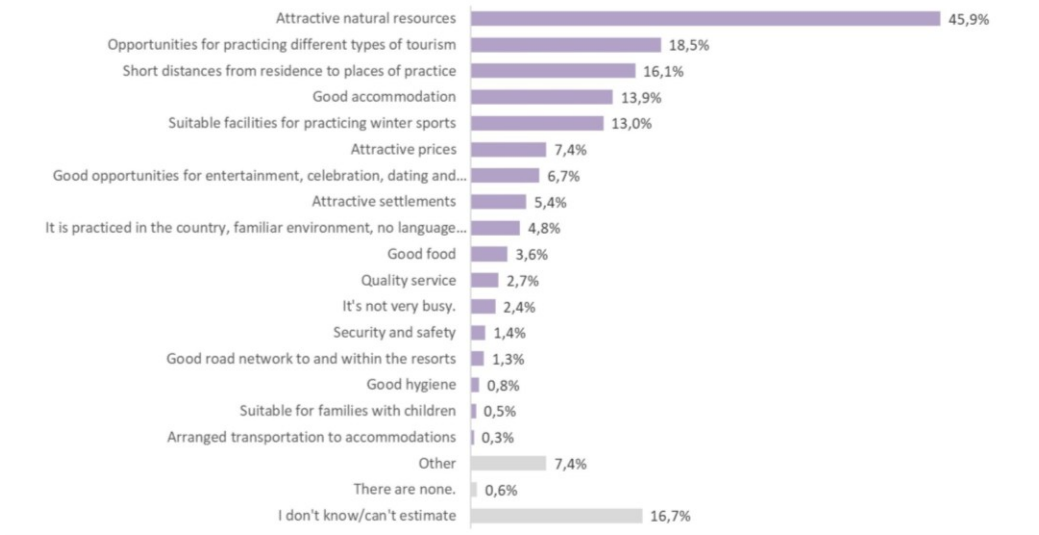

Figure 6. *Main advantages of winter leisure tourism in Bulgaria*

4.2. Perceived Disadvantages

The most prominent disadvantage of winter leisure tourism is the high prices, cited by 48.5% of respondents (Figure 7). This finding stands in sharp contrast to the mere 7.4% who considered prices an advantage, highlighting a fundamental perception problem: Bulgarian winter tourism is perceived as expensive relative to the value delivered.

Other notable disadvantages include unsuitable natural conditions (11.7%), the low quality of services (10.8%), the unmaintained road network to and within resorts (8.5%), and redevelopment/overdevelopment issues (6.1%). Workload constraints were mentioned by 4.0%, and insufficient or poor-quality winter sports facilities by 3.9%. Security, safety, and medical care concerns (3.6%) and the perception that foreign tourists receive priority over Bulgarians (2.4%) also feature among the grievances. A substantial 21.1% of respondents could not provide an estimate, which is a higher share than that for the question of the advantages of winter leisure tourism in Bulgaria.

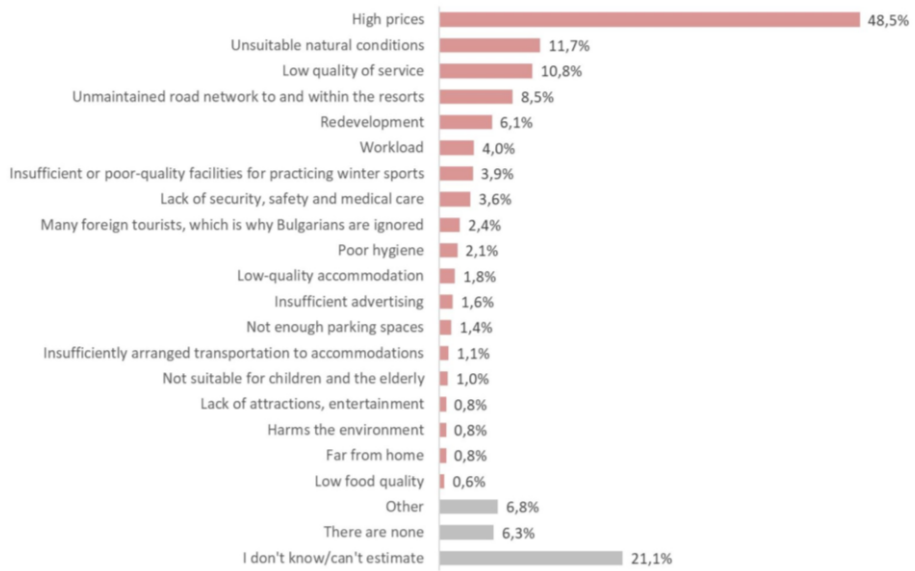

Figure 7. *Main disadvantages of winter leisure tourism in Bulgaria*

4.3. Advantages of Winter Destinations Abroad

When asked about the main advantages of winter/ski tourism at foreign destinations compared to Bulgaria, the responses reveal clear competitive weaknesses. As shown in Figure 8, the top-cited advantage of foreign destinations is higher quality of service (40.1%), directly confirming that service quality is a critical gap in Bulgarian winter tourism.

The specificity and uniqueness of foreign places rank second at 34.2%, followed by the availability of more ski runs (25.9%) and better accessibility to ski slopes (22.4%). Lower prices in accommodations of the same category (20.1%) further reinforce the price-value perception problem identified domestically. Well-maintained transport network, water supply, and sewage infrastructure (17.5%), as well as greater security (16.3%), rounded out the top factors. A noteworthy 18.7% of respondents could not determine the advantages of winter destinations abroad, possibly reflecting limited international winter tourism experience.

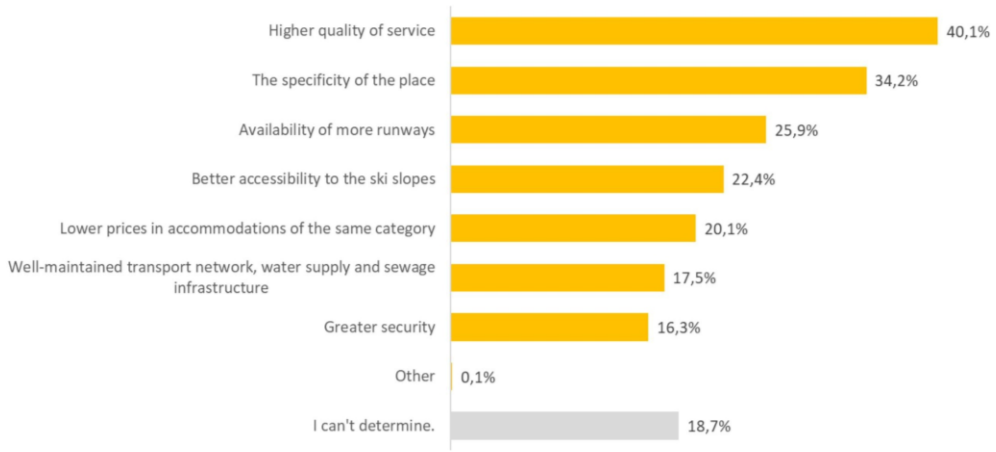

Figure 8. *Main advantages of winter/ski destinations abroad*

5. Summer Leisure Tourism

5.1. Perceived Advantages

Summer leisure tourism in Bulgaria benefits from an even stronger association with natural resources than winter tourism. As Figure 9 shows, 61.4% of respondents cite attractive natural resources as the primary advantage, and it is significantly higher compared to the 45.9% for winter tourism. According to importance, the second rank has received short distances from residence to summer leisure destinations with 17.5%, followed by attractive prices (11.7%), opportunities for enjoying the different types of tourism (10.4%), and good entertainment opportunities (9.7%).

A wide choice of destinations (9.1%), good accommodation (6.6%), and the familiarity of the domestic setting with no language barrier (5.9%) are also mentioned. Good food (4.9%) and attractive settlements (3.9%) receive moderate recognition. However, key quality indicators score low: quality service (2.7%), security and safety (2.5%), and good hygiene (2.5%). The "don't know/can't estimate" share drops to 5.3%, markedly lower than for winter tourism, indicating greater familiarity with summer tourism offerings among the population.

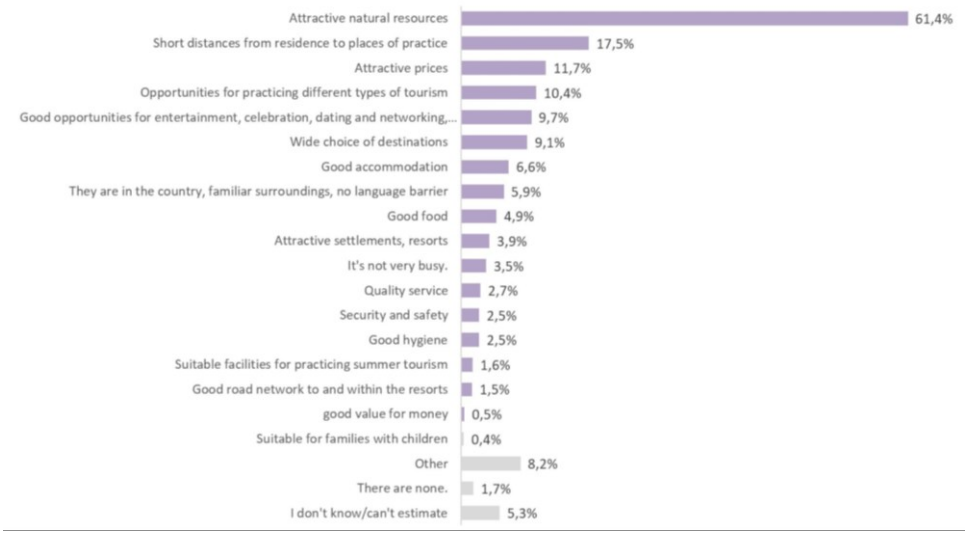

Figure 9. *Main advantages of summer leisure tourism in Bulgaria*

5.2. Perceived Disadvantages

As in the case with winter tourism, high prices dominate the list of perceived disadvantages of summer tourism, cited by 47.0% of respondents (Figure 10). However, the second-ranked disadvantage diverges significantly: redevelopment and overdevelopment are cited by 27.4%, a markedly higher share than the 6.1% for winter tourism. This likely reflects concerns about coastal overdevelopment and its impact on the summer tourism experience.

Crowding and noise (16.1%), poor hygiene (13.3%), environmental harm (13.2%), and the low quality of services (12.9%) form a cluster of substantial concerns. These issues paint a picture of summer tourism under considerable strain from overcrowding and insufficient quality management. Additional problems include insufficient or poor-quality free beach areas (4.6%), lack of security and medical care (4.1%), the perception that foreign tourists are prioritised over Bulgarians (4.0%), and poor road networks (3.6%).

Figure 10. *Main disadvantages of summer leisure tourism in Bulgaria*

5.3. Advantages of Summer Destinations Abroad

The perceived advantages of summer/seaside destinations abroad provide perhaps the starkest competitive benchmarking data. As shown in Figure 11, the top-cited advantage is cleaner beaches and sea waters (53.8%), directly mirroring the hygiene and environmental concerns raised about domestic summer tourism. Higher quality of service ranks second at 51.7%, confirming the service gap identified across both seasons.

The specificity of foreign places (39.7%) and lower prices in equivalent-category accommodations (38.4%) reinforce the twin challenges of differentiation and value perception. Infrastructure advantages — well-maintained transport, water supply, and sewage systems (21.1%) and availability of more green spaces (20.9%) — highlight deficiencies in Bulgaria's resort infrastructure. Greater security (16.2%) is also noted. Only 9.1% of respondents could not determine the advantages of summer/seaside destinations abroad, suggesting a broader international summer travel experience compared to winter tourism.

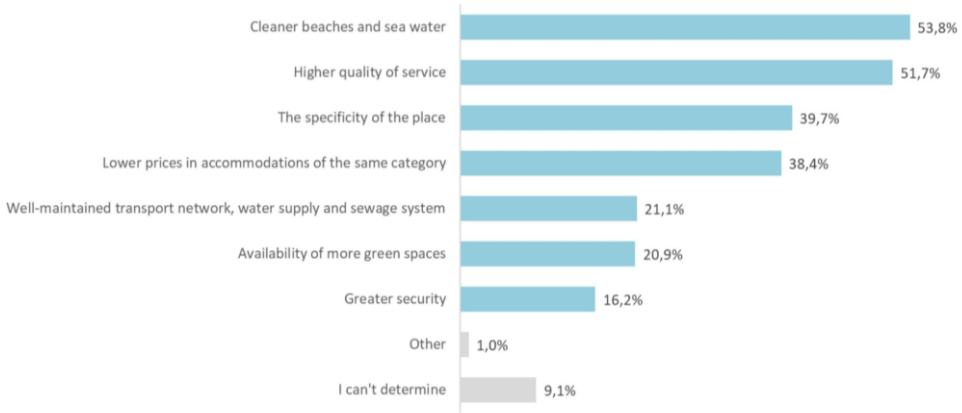

Figure 11. *Main advantages of summer/seaside destinations abroad*

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the research done during the project are summarized in several main directions:

- Improvement of the management of tourist destinations at the national and regional level.

- Improving the service quality so that customers receive higher satisfaction from the offered tourist products and destinations. The survey results show that when choosing a place for recreation, opinions received directly from friends and relatives are of the greatest importance.

- Elaborating marketing strategies, considering the diverse attitudes and reasons when choosing destinations for winter and summer vacations.

- Creating tourist products for domestic tourism based on the attitudes of respondents from different demographic groups.

- Winter and summer domestic tourism disadvantages and advantages, derived from the project research, can serve as start-ups to cover market niches in the national tourism market.

Four specialists in the field of tourism, one statistician and four geographers worked on the project.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper presents the results of the "Modeling and research of public attitudes of Bulgarian citizens regarding the image of domestic leisure tourism - situational analysis and conceptual framework for overcoming the negatives" project, funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund, contract № КП06-Н65/6 from 12.12.2022.

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DOMESTIC TOURISM AND HERITAGE VALORIZATION: A STUDY OF THE SÃO FRANCISCO CULTURAL CENTER IN JOÃO PESSOA, PARAÍBA

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Abstract: *This study analyzes the significance of the São Francisco Cultural Center (CCSF) for domestic tourism in João Pessoa, emphasizing its historical and cultural value as a tourist attraction. The research adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach, drawing on bibliographic and documentary sources as well as photographic records collected between 2023 and 2026. The findings indicate that visits to the CCSF can contribute to the development of local tourism by strengthening cultural identity and promoting heritage education. The study also highlights the importance of effective planning and management to ensure the preservation and sustainable use of cultural heritage.*

Keywords*: domestic tourism; heritage; culture; São Francisco Cultural Center.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism plays a significant role in socioeconomic development, particularly in regions characterized by cultural diversity and historical heritage. In this context, domestic tourism stands out due to its relevance to visitor flows and its contribution to sectoral stability (Ignarra, 2013; Beni, 2006). Cultural tourism, in turn, integrates leisure and learning experiences, fostering engagement with local culture and contributing to the appreciation and enhancement of tourist destinations (Brambilla & Baptista, 2017).

According to the Ministry of Tourism (MTUR, 2018), strengthening cultural tourism contributes to the democratization of access to Brazil's cultural heritage and supports the systematic valorization of regional and local destinations. In this context, João Pessoa, the capital of the state of Paraíba in the Northeast region, stands out due to the presence of the São Francisco Cultural Center (CCSF). This 17th-century Franciscan architectural complex is listed as national heritage by the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN, 2014) and is widely recognized as one of the most significant examples of Northeastern Brazilian Baroque (Brambilla, Vanzella & Queiroz, 2022).

The São Francisco Cultural Center encompasses the Church of São Francisco, the Convent of Santo Antônio, and adjoining chapels, distinguished by exuberant Baroque ornamentation, imported Portuguese tile panels, and expressive colonial religious symbolism. In light of these characteristics, this study aims to analyze the contribution of the São Francisco Cultural Center to the development of domestic tourism in João Pessoa, Paraíba.

METHODOLOGY

This research is characterized as a descriptive study aimed at analyzing the influence of the São Francisco Cultural Center (CCSF) on domestic tourism in João Pessoa-PB. According to Gil (2002), this type of approach enables the observation and correlation of phenomena without direct manipulation, thereby facilitating the description of relationships between

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cultural heritage and tourism flows.

The methodological design is bibliographic and documentary in nature and adopts a qualitative approach. Barreto (2000) emphasizes that document analysis is essential for understanding the intersections between heritage and tourism, while Flick (2013) highlights that qualitative research is particularly effective in capturing the symbolic dimensions of heritage.

Data collection was based on institutional documents, including reports produced by the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN) and strategic planning documents issued by the Ministry of Tourism. These sources were complemented by photographic records obtained through field research and from the São Francisco Cultural Center's own collection, covering the period from 2023 and 2026.

The analysis integrates bibliographic sources, documentary evidence, and visual records, in line with the methodological recommendations of Minayo (2014), who argues that this form of triangulation is particularly valuable for interpretive studies in the social sciences.

RESULTS

a) Documentary analysis

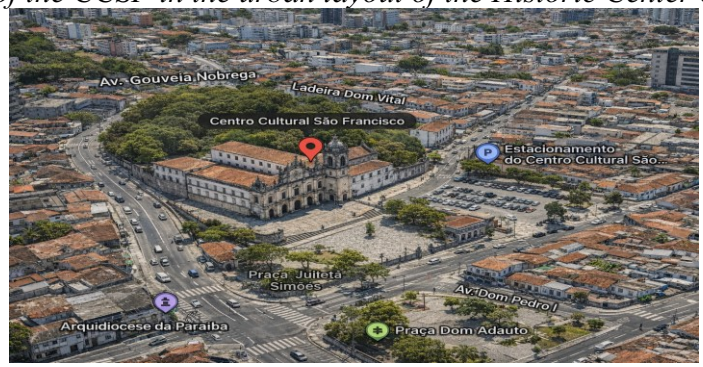
Documentary analysis constituted a central stage in mapping the management, preservation, and promotion of the CCSF as a domestic tourist attraction. Through the analysis of the institutional triad composed of the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN), the Archdiocese of Paraíba, and the Ministry of Tourism, it was possible to identify the actions that support the conservation of the property and its inclusion in the national tourism circuit, as outlined below:

- IPHAN - Federal agency responsible for the protection and official listing of cultural assets, based on Decree-Law No. 25 of 1937, which establishes the legal framework for safeguarding Brazil's historical and artistic heritage (Brazil, 1937). IPHAN's ordinances and technical regulations define criteria for interventions in listed properties, prohibiting unauthorized alterations and prioritizing the public interest in heritage preservation (IPHAN, 2020).
- Archdiocese of Paraíba - Legal owner of the property that houses the CCSF. The complex belongs to the Archdiocesan Mitre and is administered through partnership with public and private institutions, according to the institutional documents analyzed (Archdiocese of Paraíba, 2018).
- Ministry of Tourism - Responsible for formulating national tourism policies, promoting tourism destinations, and encouraging domestic tourism. In this framework, the CCSF is incorporated into strategic tourism itineraries and promotional actions aimed at strengthening cultural tourism at the national level (MTUR, 2022)

b) Analysis of photographic records

The analysis of photographic records represented a complementary and strategic step in understanding the São Francisco Cultural Center (CCSF) as a domestic tourist attraction. The images analyzed cover the period from 2023 to 2026 and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural heritage under study, as well as its potential for tourism development. These visual records allow for the observation of how heritage is appropriated, preserved, and presented to visitors in practice.

Figure 1 *Location of the CCSF in the urban layout of the Historic Center of João Pessoa.*



Google Images, 2026

The São Francisco Cultural Center (CCSF) is located in the Historic Center of João Pessoa, as shown in Figure 1, in the initial area of colonial urban occupation, near the former Porto do Capim. This area corresponds to the site where the city's earliest buildings and the urban layout were established and remain preserved to this day (IPHAN, 2023). Founded in 1589 with the arrival of Franciscan friars, the architectural complex, which includes the Church of São Francisco and the Convent of Santo Antônio, represents a fundamental religious and urban landmark in the historical formation of the city (São Francisco Cultural Center, 2024).

Beyond its central geographical location, the complex occupies a key historical position, as it is situated in the nucleus from which João Pessoa originally developed. It bears witness to the colonial period and to the religious expansion that accompanied urban growth. In this sense, the CCSF preserves collective memory and reinforces local cultural identity, thereby strengthening cultural tourism and contributing to sustainable regional development through the appreciation of the Franciscan legacy.

Figure 2 *Facade of the São Francisco Cultural Center.*

Oliveira 2024-2026

The facade of the São Francisco Cultural Center, shown in Figure 2, is a significant example of 18th-century Northeastern Brazilian Baroque architecture, notable for its historical, artistic, and heritage value. Protected by IPHAN, the monument represents an important element of João Pessoa's urban formation and functions as a major tourist attraction, contributing to heritage valorization and the development of cultural tourism (IPHAN, 2024; João Pessoa City Hall, 2025; Brambilla & Baptista, 2017).

Figure 3 *Churchyard and cloister of the Cultural Center*

Oliveira 2026

Figure 3 shows the churchyard (inner courtyard) of the São Francisco Cultural Center with visitors, highlighting its role as a space for circulation, contemplation, and interaction with cultural heritage. As part of the religious architectural complex, this area enhances the tourism experience by allowing direct contact with historical elements such as the arcades and the original flooring. Thus, the courtyard functions as a social area and as an attraction for domestic tourism (IPHAN, 2018; Rodriguez, 1992).

Figure 4. *Visitors at the São Francisco Cultural Center*

Oliveira 2026

In addition to its religious and architectural significance, the São Francisco Cultural Center contributes to local economic development through visitor flows that benefit nearby businesses and services, as illustrated in Figure 4. The work of local tour operators and guides organizes visits and strengthens the creative economy, helping to retain income within the region. Beyond economic impacts, visits to the complex have social and educational dimensions, as they promote cultural identity, foster heritage awareness, and encourage preservation practices. In this context, the Franciscan complex emerges as a key element for heritage education and cultural appreciation, supported by IPHAN's preservation policies (Beni, 2001; Choay, 2006; Greffe, 2003; IPHAN, 2014; Pelegrini, 2006; Troitiño Vinuesa, 2003).

Figure 5 *Local guides - Educational moment during a visit to the São Francisco Cultural Center.*

Adapted from @ifrnzn

Figure 5 shows guides and visitors inside the São Francisco Cultural Center. The presence of local guides plays a fundamental role in the tourism experience by facilitating the historical and artistic interpretation of the monument and enhancing visitors' understanding of its cultural and religious significance.

In addition to its historical relevance, the Cultural Center plays an important role in the promotion of cultural tourism by contributing to the strengthening of local identity and the dissemination of heritage-related knowledge. Guided visits foster heritage education by bringing visitors and the local community into closer contact with the history of the monument and by encouraging preservation-oriented attitudes. In this context, cultural tourism functions as a social and educational instrument, particularly when associated with activities involving students and educational institutions. Direct engagement with heritage thus contributes to the development of historical awareness and to the recognition of the importance of cultural assets in the construction of collective memory (IPHAN, 2014; Sant'Anna, 2017).

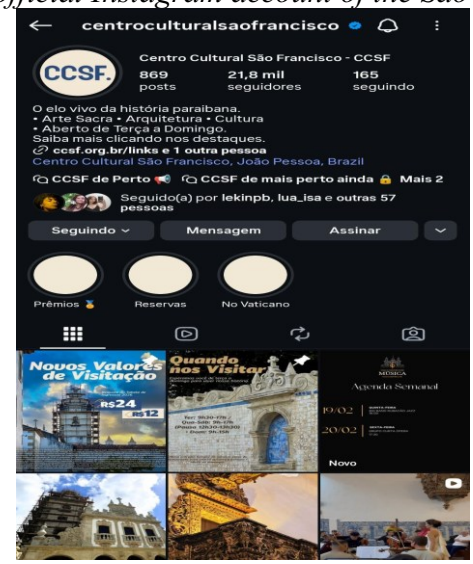
c) Tourism Promotion of the CCSF

Tourism promotion is essential for enhancing cultural attractions and increasing visitor flows, thereby integrating heritage assets into the tourism market (Beni, 2006). In this framework, the São Francisco Cultural Center, located in João Pessoa, stands out as a significant historical and cultural heritage site. Its promotion occurs through institutional websites, travel agencies and tour guides, printed materials, and inclusion in tourism itineraries. According to the Ministry of Tourism (2018a), the promotion of cultural destinations contributes to heritage valorization and to the strengthening of local cultural identity.

In addition, social media, particularly the Cultural Center's official Instagram account, plays an important role in increasing the visibility of the attraction by disseminating information, images, and cultural activities carried out in the site:

- Tourism promotion strengthens cultural attractions and increases the flow of visitors (Beni, 2006).
- The São Francisco Cultural Center, located in João Pessoa, is an important historical and cultural heritage site promoted for tourism.
- Promotion occurs through institutional websites, tourism agencies, tour guides, printed materials, and tourism itineraries.
- The official Instagram account of the São Francisco Cultural Center disseminates information on visits, location, images of the site, and cultural activities, as shown in Figure 6, since social networks increase access to information and facilitate the promotion of tourist attractions.

Figure 6 *Image from the official Instagram account of the São Francisco Cultural Center*



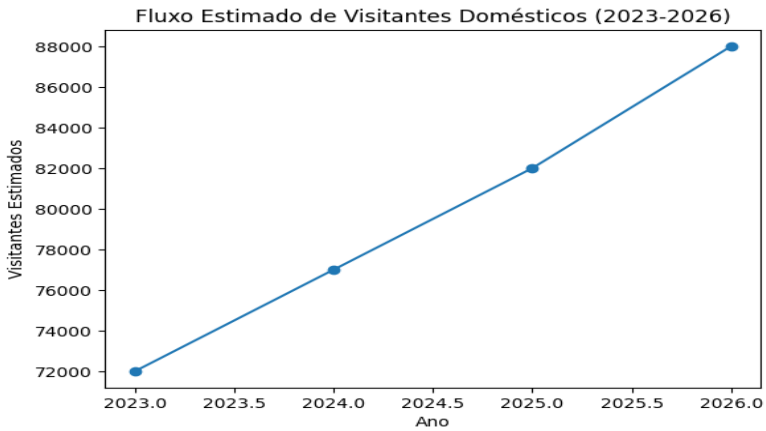
Adapted from @centroculturalsaofrancisco

d) Flow of domestic visitors

Official annual data detailing the flow of domestic visitors to the São Francisco Cultural Center in João Pessoa for the period between 2023 and 2026 are not available. However, visitor estimates can be based on previous empirical studies and on trends in state-level tourism growth. Existing research indicates that the site receives approximately 72,000 visitors per year, with a visitor profile predominantly composed of tourists from the state of Paraíba and a high level of visitor satisfaction (Silva & Ramalho, 2011).

Recent tourism indicators for the state of Paraíba reveal sustained growth in tourism activity, including increases in travel volume and tourism-related revenue. This scenario suggests a favorable trend for cultural attractions such as the São Francisco Cultural Center (Paraíba Tourism Company [PBTUR], 2024; Paraíba Tourism Observatory [OTPB], 2025). Based on an estimated average annual growth rate of approximately 7%, a gradual increase in visitor numbers to the CCSF between 2023 and 2026 can be projected, as Illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7 *Estimated flow of domestic visitors to the São Francisco Cultural Center (2023–2026)*



Adapted from PBTur (2024), OTPB (2025), and Silva and Ramalho (2011).

DISCUSSION

Domestic tourism contributes to the appreciation and preservation of cultural heritage by fostering closer connections between visitors and destinations, and by strengthening historical and cultural recognition (Barreto, 2012). In this context, the increase in visitor flows to the São Francisco Cultural Center, located in João Pessoa, reinforces its relevance as a tourist attraction and as a site of memory in the city's historic center. Visitor flows also generate positive economic impacts in the surrounding area, as cultural tourism stimulates local economic activity and contributes to the revitalization of historic urban áreas (Beni, 2006). Furthermore, the tourism experience strengthens cultural identity and promotes heritage awareness, encouraging heritage preservation (Barretto, 2012; IPHAN, 2014).

On the other hand, increased visitor flows require appropriate planning and management in order to prevent damage to heritage assets. This challenge highlights the need for coordinated action among government agencies, local communities, and the private sector (Choay, 2001). In this regard, public policies and regulatory guidelines issud by the Ministry of Tourism and the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute are essential to ensuring the preservation and sustainable use of cultural heritage (MTUR, 2018; Funari & Pelegrini, 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

To analyze how the São Francisco Cultural Center influences domestic tourism, this study examined its economic, cultural, social, and heritage-related impacts in order to better understand the challenges associated with the preservation and sustainable management of historical heritage.

Domestic tourism plays a significant role in the tourism development of the city of João Pessoa, Paraíba, contributing to increased visitor flows, boosting the local economy, strengthening cultural identity, and promoting heritage education. However, these benefits must be supported by effective preservation policies and sustainable management practices to ensure the protection of historical heritage for future generations. In this regard, the strengthening of domestic tourism presents positive prospects for the São Francisco Cultural Center, particularly through investments in tourism signage, accessibility, heritage interpretation, and heritage education.

Furthermore, the integration of cultural tourism with religious and educational tourism has the potential to expand the site's reach and to contribute to the sustainable development of the city.

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DISCURSIVE SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM: AGENCY AND PERCEPTION ACROSS DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

Renzo Mocini[1]

ABSTRACT: *This study investigates how domestic and international tourism texts construct experiential and cognitive engagement through high-frequency verbs. Using comparable corpora from VisitEngland (domestic) and VisitBritain (international), the analysis combines quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative contextual interpretation, capturing both statistical prominence and semiotic function. Findings show that international texts foreground durative, discovery-oriented experiences, positioning readers as active adventurers, while domestic texts emphasize routine, culturally familiar engagement. The study demonstrates how these lexical choices contribute to discursive sustainability, creating enduring, culturally coherent representations of destinations and shaping audience-specific imaginaries over time.*

KEYWORDS: *sustainability, tourism, discourse, semiotic, engagement*

INTRODUCTION

In the broad landscape of tourism studies, a growing body of research has highlighted the discursive and cultural dimensions of travel experience. From MacCannell (1976) and his work on authenticity to Urry (1990) and his reflections on the "tourist gaze", scholars have long emphasized that tourism is not merely about physical movement, but also involves the ways in which places are perceived and interpreted. Researchers such as Dann (1996) and Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) have further demonstrated the pivotal role of language in shaping the perception of destinations. While these studies show how discourse shapes tourist experience and destination imaginaries, they pay less attention to the temporal durability of these representations. It is at this intersection between discourse and durability that the notion of sustainability becomes analytically relevant.

In marketing and destination management, sustainability has traditionally been framed in terms of environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Building on the view of tourism as discursively constructed, this paper adopts a complementary perspective that conceptualizes sustainability as a representational and communicative process. From this standpoint, it concerns the capacity of texts to construct coherent, culturally grounded, and enduring representations of places, shaping perceptions that remain stable and resilient beyond short-term trends or marketing fads. Discursive sustainability emerges when linguistic and semiotic strategies generate experiential patterns that position the reader, activate culturally sedimented knowledge, and foster meaningful engagement with the destination.

By contrast, promotional discourse can be considered non-sustainable or ephemeral when it relies on inconsistent frames, transient trends, vague or overly generic descriptors, or messages that conflict with local cultural expectations. For instance, emphasizing only trendy events or generic superlatives without reference to local culture may attract temporary attention but leave visitors without a stable or culturally meaningful understanding of the destination.

Previous studies by Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2011), as well as Font and Scott McCabe (2017), and Mocini (2009; 2024), highlight the importance of lexical and evaluative choices in shaping coherent promotional narratives and fostering positive perceptions over time. Drawing on this literature, this paper foregrounds discursive sustainability as a distinct yet complementary analytical lens: the capacity of linguistic and semiotic patterns to construct

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durable, culturally informed, and cognitively engaging representations of destinations.

Based on these insights, the study examines domestic and international tourism texts collected from institutional websites. The analysis investigates how high-frequency verbs such as *explore, see, discover,* and *visit* function as cultural condensers that model forms of engagement, activate cognitive frames, and contribute to the discursive sustainability of destinations. Here, cultural condensers extend Lotman's (1990) "semiotic condensers" by emphasizing how tourism texts encode culturally specific experiences and perceptions, connecting semiotic structures to audience-specific imaginaries. Consequently, tourism texts do not merely reflect reality; they actively shape how places are imagined, experienced, and remembered over time.

CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

The present study analyzes two parallel corpora of approximately 32,000 words each. Each corpus includes a comparable number of texts, ensuring balance not only in size but also in textual distribution. The data were compiled from December 2025 to January 2026 to ensure temporal consistency. Although modest in size, these corpora were deliberately designed to be fit for purpose, following a principled, purpose-driven approach. As noted in corpus linguistics, the value of a corpus depends not on its quantitative extent but on its suitability for addressing specific research questions (Sinclair, 2004, quoted in Smith, 2013). From this perspective, a specialized corpus, even of limited size, can provide reliable insights when combined with a coherent qualitative framework.

The selection of the two corpora is grounded in the distinct institutional roles of VisitEngland and VisitBritain, as defined in official UK government and parliamentary sources. According to the British Tourist Authority Framework Document (2024–2027), "VisitEngland is responsible for supporting the visitor economy within England, whereas VisitBritain works on behalf of Great Britain to promote the UK as a destination to potential visitors from overseas". This confirms that VisitEngland primarily targets domestic tourism, often collaborating with regional Destination Management Organisations, while VisitBritain focuses on international tourism promotion through global marketing campaigns (OECD, 2022; UK Parliament, 2023). This institutional differentiation ensures that texts collected from VisitEngland can be interpreted as domestic tourism discourse targeting UK residents, whereas texts from VisitBritain constitute international tourism discourse addressed to foreign audiences.

To maximize comparability between the two corpora, only sections with equivalent thematic content and comparable narrative-promotional genres were selected. Both corpora include texts describing destinations, cultural and heritage sites, food and drink experiences, outdoor and nature activities, and travel itineraries, while sections such as bullet-point listings, booking interfaces, event calendars, or user-generated content were deliberately excluded.

The qualitative analysis draws on cognitive linguistic approaches to framing and experiential modeling (Evans and Green 2006; Lakoff 1987; Fillmore 1982), structural and cultural semiotics (Greimas 1983; Lotman 1990), and social semiotics and discourse analysis (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014; Fairclough 1995), thereby enabling the interpretation of how lexical choices model experiential scripts and reader positioning. This approach ensures that observed linguistic variation can be more confidently attributed to audience orientation (domestic vs. international) rather than structural or stylistic divergences.

For the quantitative analysis, Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) was used to generate lists of the most frequent words across both corpora. The part-of-speech tagging functionality enabled the extraction of the most frequent verbs which were then subject to further analysis.

The quantitative findings were complemented by a manual qualitative examination of their occurrences, allowing a fine-grained exploration of their co-text and discourse functions. This mixed-methods approach ensures that the analysis captures both the statistical prominence of words and their semiotic and pragmatic functions within promotional discourse.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In line with Lotman's view of the text as "a mechanism capable of storing and generating cultural information" (1990: 11), the two tourism corpora analyzed here can be understood as semiotic condensers of distinct cultural models of tourism. Far from functioning as neutral promotional materials, these texts encapsulate culturally specific ways of imagining mobility, experience, and the relationship between visitor and place. The recurrent process types identified across the corpora provide linguistic evidence of the text's capacity to model and reproduce cultural meanings.

The quantitative analysis underpinning this study is summarized in Table 1, which presents the most frequent verbs in the domestic corpus (henceforth DC) and the international corpus (henceforth IC). These frequency data form the basis for the qualitative examination of the verbs discussed in the following sections.

Table 1. Most frequent verbs in the domestic (DC) and international (IC) corpora

Domestic Corpus (DC)	Verb Frequency	International Corpus (IC)	Verb Frequency
be	508	be	639
open	280	have	131
have	131	take	99
visit	86	explore	88
take	77	see	81
explore	74	make	79
include	66	discover	77
do	61	get	61
make	58	film	56
get	44	find	55
see	44	include	53
look	43	look	52
serve	41	open	50
feature	40	follow	40
discover	38	enjoy	39

The focus on the subset of verbs *explore, see, discover,* and *visit* is guided by three main criteria: semantic richness, discursive relevance, and experiential modeling potential. Highly frequent auxiliaries such as *be* and *have*, as well as semantically light verbs such as *do, make, take,* and *get* (commonly referred to as "light verbs", which contribute primarily grammatical or aspectual meaning rather than semantic content; Butt, 2000: 135), were excluded from the analytical focus. Despite their high frequency, these verbs provide limited insight into how tourism experiences are cognitively and culturally framed. Similarly, verbs such as *include* or *open* serve primarily structural or informational functions, organizing the text without directly modeling the experiential relationship between tourists and places.

By contrast, *explore, see, discover,* and *visit* encode perceptual, interactive, and affective modes of engagement with place. They occur frequently enough in both corpora to enable meaningful comparison, while remaining semantically rich and culturally informative. Focusing on these verbs therefore allows researchers to examine more closely how lexical choices contribute to the discursive construction of tourism, shaping experiential and interpretive frames that guide readers' perceptions of destinations over time and across different audience contexts.

Explore

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) online,[2] the verb *explore* encompasses meanings such as "to travel to or around an area or a country in order to learn about it", "examine a subject or a possibility completely or carefully in order to find out more about it", and "explore something (with something) to feel something with your hands or another part of the body". Its semantic range notably includes learning and durative engagement, which may explain its prominence, particularly in the IC. Across both corpora, *explore* functions as a semiotic operator mediating experiential positioning, either anchoring tourists within familiar cultural frames (typically in the DC) or guiding them toward the frontier of the semiosphere[3] (typically in the IC).

In context, *explore* signals a multi-layered, durative tourist experience: it invites discovery and inquiry, encourages active engagement with both the environment and the imagination, and foregrounds novelty and uniqueness. This verb does not simply instruct but conveys a sense of agency, positioning the reader as an active participant in the experience. Linguistically, imperatives such as "Explore one of a huge number of hiking trails…" (DC) encourage choice and engagement, thereby constructing a form of reader empowerment understood as the discursive shaping of the visitor's capacity to act and engage with the destination. This perspective aligns with notions of empowerment in tourism discourse, where visitors are framed as able to shape and inhabit their experiences (Mocini, 2024). From a socio-semiotic viewpoint, this effect can be interpreted as a modalization of the addressee primarily along the *can-do* dimension (Greimas and Courtés, 2007), through which *explore* structures the reader's perceptual and evaluative stance, transforming the text from mere description into a guide for agentive and culturally situated participation. In the DC, *explore* frequently signals a durative, culturally embedded engagement with place:

(1) Fasten your bonnet to explore Bridgerton filming locations and the real-life places that inspired Jane Austen, or loosen it for Bath-brewed beer, stand-up comedy at Komedia and a dip in Thermae Bath Spa's rooftop pool (DC).

In this exhortation, *explore* acquires a distinctly domestic coloration. The surrounding lexical choices, intertextual references (*Bridgerton, Jane Austen*), local leisure practices (*Bath-brewed beer, stand-up comedy*), and idiomatic phrasing (*fasten your bonnet*), position the reader firmly within the semiosphere of English domestic tourism, activating a frame of cultural familiarity and experiential proximity. Here, *explore* does not invite the discovery of the unknown; rather, it guides the reader through a shared repertoire of culturally recognized experiences, reinforcing continuity and everyday agency while maintaining engagement with locally meaningful practices. This interaction is further enriched by co-occurring evaluative

[2] *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries online. Retrieved February 7, 2026, from https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/.*

[3] *Lotman's semiosphere, understood as the cultural space of shared signs and meanings, structures the ways tourists interpret destinations (Lotman, 1990).*

verbs such as *enjoy*, which frame the activities as pleasurable and personally engaging:

(2) Enjoy the calm atmosphere as you explore the coastline and nearby seafront gardens (don't forget to say hello to the resident ducks) and then take a moment to scratch your nostalgic itch by playing on the 2p machines on the St Annes Pier (DC).

In (2), *explore* does not prompt the tourist to discover the unknown, but to navigate a repertoire of shared, recognizable cultural experiences, while *enjoy* signals that these experiences are pleasurable, reinforcing agency and personal involvement. The inclusion of seemingly minor details such as *resident ducks* and *2p machines* strengthens this effect, conveying a sense of continuity, local authenticity, and approachable leisure.

While the lexeme remains constant across the two corpora, its axiological load is reconfigured in each corpus, reflecting the underlying cultural model and the position assigned to the reader within the semiosphere. Indeed, in the IC, *explore* more often conveys progressive access to unfamiliar cultural spaces, activating a landscape-and-discovery frame oriented toward scenic appreciation and spatial expansion:

(3) Explore one of a huge number of hiking trails, covering hills, dales and snaking rivers. Amble along our breathtaking coastline, and soak up scenic towns and historic villages (IC).

Here, *explore* is embedded in a lexical environment emphasizing scale (*a huge number*), topographical diversity (*hills, dales, snaking rivers*), and aesthetic evaluation (*breathtaking, scenic, historic*). Unlike domestic instances, which guide the reader through familiar micro-practices, this configuration frames movement across expansive natural settings and iconic landscapes. The reader is positioned as a subject progressively entering a space defined by visual richness and experiential discovery. Co-occurring verbs such as *amble* and *soak up* reinforce the durative, processual nature of the experience. From a Lotmanian perspective, familiarity is not presupposed but emerges as the horizon of the experiential programme, with initial alterity gradually transformed into recognisable and appropriable experience.

Discover

From a processual perspective, while *explore* foregrounds continuous, durative engagement with the environment, *discover*, which occurs frequently in the IC and less so in the DC, structures the tourist experience in a more temporally discrete and punctuated manner. This verb activates the "discovery" frame, but in a temporally bounded and result-oriented configuration, rather than following the durative, immersive trajectory associated with *explore*. Its semantic potential includes "discover something to be the first person to become aware that a particular place or thing exists", "find somebody/something that was hidden or that you did not expect to find", and "to find some information about something".[4] In other words, each instance of *discover* corresponds to a distinct, memorable experience, rather than a continuous process. In this way, *discover* positions the reader as an adventurer encountering episodic and culturally meaningful experiences within the cultural space, rather than gradually moving through it:

(4) Get a taste of the action and head out of the city on the Cambrian Way to discover 185 miles (almost 300 km) of National Parks, fairy-tale castles and snow-capped peaks. With a buzzing arts and foodie scene and independent shops galore, Cardiff is your gateway to all that's wonderful about Wales (IC).

The verb *discover* is embedded in a lexical environment highlighting spatial extent (*185*

[4] *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries online. Retrieved February 7, 2026, from https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/.*

miles), topographical and cultural diversity (*National Parks, castles, peaks, arts and foodie scene*), and evaluative intensification (*fairy-tale, buzzing, galore*). The term *gateway* semiotically indexes the opening of a structured and culturally meaningful pathway, connecting discrete discoveries to a broader, coherent experiential frame. Another IC example further illustrates this episodic and symbolic configuration:

(5) If you've a taste for gin like Britain's favourite secret agent, discover how gin and rum are made on a guided tour and tasting session of the Shakespeare Distillery (IC).

Here, the reader encounters a clearly bounded, sensorially rich, and culturally meaningful experience, highlighting the punctuated nature of the engagement (a single tasting tour as a distinct episode) and the symbolic significance of the activity (heritage, cultural production, iconic associations). Unlike *explore*, which foregrounds continuous immersion, *discover* foregrounds episodic moments of revelation that are temporally and experientially discrete. This contrasts with DC texts, where similar lexical items often frame participation as culturally familiar, routine, and socially embedded, rather than introducing novel or symbolically charged points of engagement. In IC texts, experiential access is constructed through these discrete encounters, allowing each moment to carry both temporal salience (punctuated) and semiotic weight (symbolic). Such patterns contribute to the discursive sustainability of tourism texts, by providing stable, culturally grounded, and cognitively engaging representations of place.

See

Building on the contrast observed with *explore* and *discover*, the verb *see* introduces a distinct yet complementary experiential configuration, despite its high frequency across both corpora. It encompasses meanings such as "to perceive with the eyes" and "to become aware of or witness",[5] foregrounding its dual perceptual and cognitive scope. In systemic-functional terms, *see* can be classified as a perceptive mental process (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014), which distinguishes it from the predominantly material and movement-oriented verbs discussed above. While *explore* and *discover* structure the tourist experience as a trajectory unfolding through space and time, *see* encodes acts of perception, recognition, and cognitive apprehension, and therefore tends to display a less explicitly processual and aspectual profile, typically interpreted as punctual or experiential rather than durative.

In the IC, this perceptual orientation often contributes to positioning the visitor as an observer encountering the destination's salient features for the first time:

(6) Look to Wales' wild west for a real adventure. Here you can see dolphins and porpoises, explore rugged islands, spot the local wildlife… and discover a new breathtaking beach every day (IC).

In (6), *see* is embedded in a cluster of perceptual and discovery verbs that construct a horizon of visual encounter with iconic natural elements. The act of seeing functions as an entry point into the experiential programme, reinforcing the visitor's status as an external observer progressively gaining access to the landscape's symbolic and aesthetic value.

By contrast, in the DC, *see* more frequently activates a frame of confirmation, recognition, or renewed appreciation of places that are implicitly within the reader's cultural horizon:

(7) See the 'greatest seaside resort on earth' as you've never seen it before (DC).

Here, the verb *see* operates dialogically, explicitly presupposing shared cultural

[5] *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries online. Retrieved February 7, 2026, from https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/.*

familiarity with the destination while simultaneously offering a reframed or intensified perspective. Similarly, in (8) below, perception is oriented toward validating an already circulating reputation rather than discovering an unknown space.

(8) You'll see why Formby is famed for its diverse coastline…(DC).

In these instances, *see* does not primarily open a trajectory of access from alterity to familiarity, but rather rearticulates pre-existing cultural knowledge, positioning the reader as an insider invited to reaffirm or deepen their recognition of the place. This pattern of perceptual confirmation can be further illustrated with the following example about Cambridge:

(9) Tuck into a plate of something delicious at one of the best places to eat in Cambridge, Fitzbillies, which has been dishing out the city's best Chelsea buns since 1921. See what all the fuss is about with a syrupy Chelsea bun or go for a more brain-friendly brekkie such as smashed avocado on toast (DC).

Here, the opening clause *Tuck into a plate of something delicious* anchors the reader in a script of everyday, embodied engagement, foregrounding participation and sensory immediacy. The subsequent *See what all the fuss is about* shifts the semantic focus from mere perception to cognitive evaluation: the reader is invited to interpret and confirm the cultural significance of the experience. The progression from ingestion to interpretive recognition constitutes a miniature experiential trajectory, moving from sensory immersion to semiotic ratification, while the colloquial *brain-friendly brekkie* reinforces everydayness and domestic familiarity. This example illustrates how *see* in the DC often mediates both perceptual and cognitive involvement, bridging engagement with culturally familiar scripts while maintaining the impression of personal discovery.

From a semiotic perspective, this DC-IC comparison further confirms the broader pattern identified in the analysis: whereas the IC tends to construct perception as the initial threshold of experiential engagement, the DC mobilises it as a mechanism of recognition within an already shared semiospheric space. Notably, extended senses of *see* also include understanding ("to comprehend") and social encounter or visitation ("to go to see someone or something"), which subtly bridges perceptual and cognitive engagement with spatio-temporal presence. In this way, *see* complements the discovery-oriented verbs discussed above and provides a conceptual bridge toward *visit*, where the emphasis shifts from perceptual-cognitive apprehension to temporally and socially framed engagement within culturally proximate spaces.

Visit

In line with the perceptual and experiential distinctions observed for *see*, the verb *visit* in DC consolidates a markedly different configuration of tourist practice. According to the OED, *visit* denotes going to a place "for a period of time" or "for a short stay" [6] highlighting its bounded temporal frame and socially oriented purpose. In the DC, this temporal framing expands into a broader script of planned participation and cultural accessibility:

(10) We've created the ultimate three-day itinerary bursting with the best places to visit in Lancashire (DC).

In (10), the verb *visit* is embedded within a programme of organised mobility, modelling tourism as a structured yet ordinary activity integrated into everyday temporal rhythms. Likewise, in (11) below, *visit* co-occurs with verbs of routine social action, framing engagement

[6] *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries online. Retrieved February 7, 2026, from https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/.*

with heritage as participatory familiarity rather than exceptional encounter:

(11) It's a rare glimpse into Britain's industrial past, where you can stroll recreated streets, visit vintage factories and shop in retro boutiques – all revealing what life was like in the 1800s to early 1900s.

Another instance of *visit* framing domestic tourism appears in (12):

(12) Looking for the tastiest places to visit near Manchester? Brindle Distillery's gin tours trace the journey of its award-winning Cuckoo Gin from botanicals to bottle, in the grounds of the family-run Holmes Farm (DC).

The combination of a familiar culinary product, a family-run setting, and a guided experience situates the visitor within a socially and culturally proximate environment, reinforcing the sense of accessibility and everydayness that characterizes domestic tourism. Here, the text emphasizes participation and routine engagement rather than exploration or novelty.

From a semiotic perspective, *visit* condenses a script of social continuity: the destination is not constructed as an external or progressively discovered space, but as a culturally proximate environment in which the reader is already symbolically positioned. Its high frequency in the DC therefore reinforces the broader pattern identified across the analysis, whereby tourism discourse models travel less as exploration of alterity and more as an extension of shared social life within an already accessible semiosphere.

Aspectually, *visit* occupies an intermediate position within the verbal system examined. It refers to a temporally bounded event, lacking the result-oriented culmination of *discover* and the open-ended, continuous trajectory of *explore*. In terms of epistemic distance, the verb presupposes a space already accessible within the subject's horizon of knowledge, allowing destinations to be framed as culturally familiar rather than cognitively unknown. Its partial semantic overlap with the extended sense of *see* ("to go to see someone or something") situates it within a domain of perceptual and social engagement, while *see* foregrounds perception, *visit* emphasizes the spatio-temporal as well as social frame of presence. This aspectual and semantic configuration makes *visit* particularly suited to domestic tourism discourse, where mobility often takes the form of short breaks in culturally proximate settings, modelling travel as a reiterative and socially embedded practice rather than a trajectory toward alterity.

By framing mobility as routine, temporally bounded, and culturally proximate, the recurrent use of *visit* supports the discursive sustainability of domestic tourism discourse: the experience is presented as easily repeatable and socially normalised, allowing the same narrative patterns of short, accessible travel to be reproduced across texts and over time. This reinforces the idea that domestic tourism texts construct stable, culturally coherent, and cognitively engaging representations of place.

CONCLUSIONS

By combining comparable corpora, frequency analysis, and qualitative contextual interpretation, this study provides a robust foundation for investigating how linguistic and semiotic patterns differ between domestic and international tourism audiences. The analysis demonstrates that high-frequency verbs, namely *explore*, *discover*, *see*, and *visit*, and their co-texts function as semiotic micro-narratives, acting as cultural condensers that extend Lotman's (1990) semiotic condensers by encoding culturally specific experiences and connecting semiotic structures to audience-specific imaginaries. These verbs guide readers' perceptions, structuring both cognitive and social engagement with destinations in culturally and experientially grounded ways.

Words in promotional discourse do not merely describe locations; they articulate cultural and experiential frames, enabling destinations to be interpreted in ways that are meaningful, coherent, and enduring. In doing so, they contribute to the discursive sustainability of tourism discourse, extending the notion of sustainability beyond environmental and economic concerns to include the stability and coherence of representational and communicative practices. Moreover, the study highlights the significance of audience construction, showing how domestic and international texts position readers within culturally and cognitively specific horizons.

From a semiotic-linguistic perspective, the verbs analysed in this study illustrate how lexical choices can function as gateways into conceptual domains, activating culturally and cognitively grounded schemas (Langacker, 1987; Evans and Green, 2006). Through these linguistic cues, tourism discourse organises coherent experiential scripts, guiding the reader's perception, evaluation, and affective engagement with destinations. This insight also offers practical implications for marketing and destination management, highlighting how specific lexical patterns can influence both cognitive and affective responses. Finally, the approach can be extended to examine how similar value nuclei are articulated in other linguistic and cultural contexts, providing a framework for comparative studies beyond the Anglophone case examined here.

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DOMESTIC TOURISM AT KOKINO ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATORY: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF INTERPRETATIVE PANELS

Ivana Manevska[1], Simona Jovanović[2]

ABSTRACT: *The megalithic site of Kokino in North Macedonia presents challenges for interpretation due to its limited and visually subtle remains. This study evaluates the site's interpretative panels, focusing on their effectiveness in conveying archaeological and archaeoastronomical knowledge and engaging domestic visitors. Panels were analyzed using established interpretive models across four categories: Design, Visitor Experience, Reaction, and Content. Results show that while the panels provide accurate and coherent scientific information on Kokino's dual function as a ritual site and megalithic observatory, they are less effective in engaging local audiences, particularly children, teenagers, and non-specialists. Dense academic text, limited visual diversity, and few reflective prompts reduce accessibility and emotional connection. Findings suggest that incorporating clear language, storytelling, vivid visuals, and interactive elements can enhance understanding, visitor engagement, and appreciation of local heritage. Age-segmented feedback and participatory approaches are recommended to optimize the panels for domestic tourism.*

KEYWORDS: *Archaeological sites, Interpretative panels, Domestic tourism, Visitor engagement, Kokino*

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological sites with limited, poorly preserved, or visually inconspicuous remains represent a interpretative challenge for contemporary scholarship: how can fragmented, buried, or "invisible" traces of past activities be transformed into meaningful historical knowledge? At many sites, the material record is inherently incomplete due to taphonomic processes, erosion, material reuse, and later destruction. As a result, what survives is often thinned, homogenized, or microscopically small, making past human activities difficult to detect without specialized analytical frameworks (Reid et al., 2023; Cereda et al., 2023).

Recent geoarchaeological and microarchaeological research has demonstrated that seemingly "empty" deposits may contain rich micro-evidence of spatial organization and activity areas. In addition to microscopic analysis, advances in remote sensing (multisensor unmanned systems, ground-penetrating radar) enable archaeologists to detect hidden structures (Brooke & Clutterbuck, 2019). However, in such contexts, interpretation is not merely an optional supplement to excavation, but the primary and essential bridge between fragmented scientific evidence and an understandable past.

Heritage interpretation does not end with academic reconstruction. A site with scarce or poorly visible remains can rarely communicate its significance to the public solely through physical evidence. In North Macedonia, as well as in the broader Balkan region, archaeological sites possess exceptional potential but face a key problem: they are insufficiently and inadequately interpreted for domestic tourists.

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Weak or poorly structured signage systems, the absence of guided interpretation, and the lack of strategic on-site management lead to misunderstanding, underestimation, and reduced appreciation of cultural heritage (Ababneh, 2017; 2021). Domestic tourists often perceive such sites as "a pile of stones" because there is no mediator to translate scientific data into accessible language. Therefore, interpretation and presentation strategies become essential for transforming ruins into coherent narratives (Calzadillas, 2024; Zanier et al., 2022).

The fundamental principle of archaeological interpretation is that meaning derives from context rather than isolated artifacts (Mitchell, 2018). To prevent misinterpretations especially at complex sites it is necessary to integrate multiple lines of evidence (a multiproxy approach) and employ transparent analytical procedures (Vos et al., 2021; Strupler, 2021). However, for this scientific knowledge to become part of the tourism offer, it must be mediated through storytelling.

Storytelling makes archaeological discoveries more meaningful and emotionally engaging for non-specialist audiences. Research shows that immersive storytelling techniques increase visitor curiosity and engagement, shifting the focus from broken stones to the people who once inhabited these spaces (Roussou et al., 2017). "Braided storytelling" combines archaeological evidence with local knowledge and memories, enabling visitors to better grasp complex concepts such as temporality, causality, and past social relations (Miller et al., 2025; Ogundiran, 2023). In this sense, narrative approaches not only convey information but also enhance visitor memory retention and learning (Sundin et al., 2018).

The interpretative challenge reaches its peak in the case of prehistoric observatories. In archaeology and archaeoastronomy, the term "observatory" does not refer to a modern scientific facility equipped with telescopes. Instead, it describes a place where people systematically observed the sky for ritual, agricultural, or calendrical purposes (Malkhasyan, 2022; Amiri et al., 2025).

Most so-called archaeological observatories are multifunctional sacred, ceremonial, or political spaces that incorporate intentional celestial alignments within broader architectural and symbolic programs (Aveni, 2003). The identification and interpretation of such sites such as the megalithic site Kokino in North Macedonia require particular caution. The mere presence of solar or lunar alignments does not conclusively prove an exclusively astronomical function; visitors must be provided with explanations of the architectural context, cultural symbolism, and ritual nature of the space (Šprajc, 2021). For this reason, Kokino represents an ideal case study for analyzing interpretative methods.

The main objective of this study is to analyze the interpretative panels at Kokino to assess how effectively they communicate archaeological and archaeoastronomical knowledge and contribute to the development of domestic tourism.

The archaeological site of Kokino is located approximately 35 km northeast of Kumanovo, on the left side of the road leading from the village of Dragomance to the village of Arbanaško (North Macedonia). It is situated on an impressive neo-volcanic hill that dominates the surrounding landscape, at an altitude of 1,013 meters, directly above the eponymous village. In local toponymy, the hill's summit is known as "Tatićev Kamen."

Study area: The archaeological site of Kokino

At the highest point of the site, two platforms carved into andesite rock are oriented along a west-east axis, with a vertical difference of approximately 20 meters. The total length of this area is around 90 meters, while its width is about 50 meters. On the lower western platform, there is a prominent block featuring several stone seats (thrones) carved directly into

the rock, positioned so that the observer faces the eastern horizon. The upper platform represents a leveled area cut into the rock, where, during the first archaeological excavations in 2001, rich stratigraphic layers and diverse movable archaeological finds were discovered.

Chronology and function of the site

Systematic archaeological research has dated the most intensive use of the site to the Bronze Age (throughout the second millennium BCE), with the highest concentration of finds from the Late Bronze Age (14th to 11th centuries BCE). The earliest traces come from the Early Bronze Age (19th–17th centuries BCE), while the most recent finds date to the developed Iron Age (around the 7th century BCE). The ceramic inventory is dominated by utilitarian vessels (for food storage and preparation), while a unique find includes a mold for casting a bronze amulet (Stankovski, 2003).

The topographical and morphological characteristics of Kokino indicate that the site functioned as a "sacred mountain" – a place where prehistoric inhabitants performed highland rituals, believing that the rocky summit was a point of contact with deities (Stankovski, 2007). Archaeological evidence confirms the performance of rituals associated with fertility cults. A particularly significant ritual took place in mid-summer. The architecture of the site was designed so that a sunbeam passes through a precisely carved trench in the vertical rock between the two platforms, illuminating only one of the thrones on the lower platform. This optical phenomenon is believed to have been used to transmit "divine legitimacy" to the person seated on the throne during the ritual.

Megalithic observatory

In addition to its cultic purpose, archaeoastronomical research has confirmed that Kokino was used as a megalithic observatory. Precisely carved stone markers in the rock were used to track the cycles of the Sun and Moon. The best-preserved marker indicates the point of sunrise on the day of the summer solstice (June 21), while the markers for the spring and autumn equinoxes (March 21 and September 23) and the winter solstice (December 22) are partially preserved.

In addition to solar markers, carefully crafted markers were also used to track specific positions of the full Moon. This evidence suggests that systematic, multi-decade observations of celestial bodies were conducted at Kokino, forming the basis for a 19-year lunar calendar whose precision represents an exceptional prehistoric scientific and cultural achievement (Stankovski, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research is to evaluate the interpretative panels at Kokino to assess their effectiveness in conveying archaeological and archaeoastronomical information and their impact on visitors. The evaluation is based on five key models and principles of interpretation from the literature, including Sam Ham's PEROT Principle (1992), Thorsten Ludwig's Interpretive Triangle (2014), Freeman Tilden's Principles of Interpretation (1977), Pásková et al.'s ABC Concept (2021), and Larry Beck's Gifts of Interpretation (2011).

Before starting the field research, the following steps were developed:

A review of the literature was conducted to gather insights and establish a theoretical foundation for the evaluation criteria.

Identification of evaluation criteria was developed based on 20 statements representing various aspects of interpretation and communication on the panels, grouped into four main categories: design, experience, reaction, and content.

The research is based on the following models and principles, divided into four categories:

Design: Focuses on the visual and functional aspects of the panels, including the use of artistic elements, clarity and organization of information, adaptation to different visitor groups, and integration of technology.

Visitor experience: Evaluates how the panels connect information with visitors' personal experiences, how engaging they are, and how effectively they explain the cultural, ritual, and archaeoastronomical significance of the site.

Visitor reaction: Analyzes how the panels encourage interaction, critical thinking, and broaden visitors' perspectives, as well as their emotional responses to the information.

Content: Focuses on the accuracy, comprehensiveness, and clarity of the content, including archaeological, archaeoastronomical, and cultural elements, and how well they relate to visitors.

Fieldwork was conducted at the Kokino archaeological site. This phase of the research involved photographing the interpretive panels at the predetermined locations. All panels were documented to capture their appearance and content. The photographs were subsequently used for detailed analysis and evaluation.

Each interpretive panel was evaluated using a Likert scale, where each statement within the four categories (Design, Experience, Reaction, Content) was rated from 1 to 5:

1 – Strongly disagree: The interpretive panel did not meet the expected criteria.

5 – Strongly agree: The interpretive panel fully met the expected criteria.

The evaluation data were then entered into Excel for further analysis.

After data collection and assigning ratings to each sign, the data were processed using statistical methods, specifically pivot analysis, to identify key insights. During this phase, the following aspects were analyzed: Average ratings by category: Average ratings were calculated for each sign within the four categories to identify which signs met the criteria best. Identification of areas for improvement: Based on the results, areas where the interpretive signs received the lowest ratings were identified, which will help guide future improvements.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results of the evaluation of the interpretative panels at Kokino. The panels were assessed across four key categories: Design, Experience, Reaction, and Content. The average ratings indicate how the panels were perceived in terms of visual and narrative presentation, quality and reliability of information, connection to visitor experience, and their ability to encourage reflection on the archaeological, cultural, and archaeoastronomical significance of the site.

Table 1. Evaluation of Interpretative Panels at Kokino

Category	No.	Evaluation Statement	Average Rating
Design	1	The interpretative panels use artistic elements to communicate information.	2.5
	2	Panels are designed to be accessible for children, teenagers, and older visitors, with a clear purpose.	2.0
	3	Images and information clearly explain the history and significance of Kokino.	4.0
	4	Organization of information makes the panels easy to follow.	3.5
	5	Panels are crafted as narratives that inform, entertain, and educate.	3.5
	6	Technology is integrated where possible to enhance visitor engagement.	4.0
	7	The information is well-researched, accurate, and reliable.	4.5
Experience	1	Panels connect the archaeological information with visitors' experiences.	3.8
	2	Information is part of a broader narrative of prehistoric life and archaeoastronomy.	3.5
	3	Visitors gain a better understanding of rituals, celestial observations, and cultural heritage.	4.0
	4	Viewing the panels encourages reflection on the significance of heritage preservation.	3.0
	5	The content is relevant and directly linked to the site's historical context.	4.5
Reaction	1	Panels encourage interaction, thought, and reflection.	3.5
	2	The narratives reveal deeper meanings about prehistoric rituals and astronomical knowledge.	4.0
	3	Panels inspire visitors to broaden their perspectives on ancient human activity.	3.5
	4	They provide a sense of spiritual and cultural connection to the site.	3.0
Content	1	Panels highlight archaeological, cultural, and archaeoastronomical elements of Kokino.	4.5
	2	The main themes of the site, including ritual and observatory functions, are clearly conveyed.	4.5
	3	Panels link the thematic content with the visitor experience.	4.0
	4	The content presents a coherent narrative, covering different aspects of the site and its significance.	4.0

DISCUSSION

The assessment of interpretive panels at Kokino demonstrates a clear strength in scientific validity. Panels scored highest in the Content category (4.0–4.5), indicating that the archaeological and archaeoastronomical information presented is accurate, comprehensive, and reliable. This aligns with principles outlined by Nowacki (2021) and Ababneh (2021), emphasizing that interpretation must prioritize factual correctness and clarity, particularly at sites with fragmentary or minimally visible remains (Reid et al., 2023; Calzadillas, 2024).

However, the data also reveal a tension between scientific accuracy and accessibility for domestic visitors. While the panels communicate complex information effectively, the Design scores were lower (2.0–4.0), reflecting limited visual diversity and poor adaptation for children, teenagers, and non-specialist audiences. This supports the observation by Liu (2020) and Zanier et al. (2022) that interpretation must bridge the gap between academic knowledge and visitor

comprehension, especially for sites like Kokino, where the material remains are "invisible" without explanation.

The panels' Design evaluation highlights strengths in content organization and narrative flow (3.5–4.0) but weaknesses in artistic elements and accessibility (2.0–2.5). While the information is structured logically and is well-researched, the panels rely heavily on text blocks with limited use of visual storytelling. As Freeman Tilden (1977) and Sam Ham (1992) emphasize, effective interpretation should combine clarity, visual appeal, and narrative elements to enhance understanding and engagement.

The lower Design ratings suggest that panels may not capture attention immediately, particularly for younger or casual visitors. Although the information is technically sound, the presentation format limits the panels' capacity to convey meaning quickly or intuitively, a crucial consideration for sites with sparse visible remains (Ababneh, 2017; Calzadillas, 2024).

Panels were rated moderately in the Experience category (3.0–4.5), indicating that they successfully connect visitors to the site's historical and astronomical significance but only partially foster personal engagement. Visitors can understand the ritual use of the lower and upper platforms, solar alignments, and lunar markers. However, reflection on broader heritage values or emotional resonance was limited, as reflected in average scores of 3.0–3.5 for reflective prompts.

Research by Roussou et al. (2017) and Miller et al. (2025) suggests that story-driven, emotionally rich content enhances visitor understanding and retention. Kokino panels provide a narrative of function and chronology, but the reliance on dense academic language may reduce personal identification and imaginative engagement, which are key to cultivating visitor appreciation and fostering heritage preservation attitudes (Sundin et al., 2018).

Reaction scores were moderate (3.0–4.0), revealing that panels stimulate cognitive curiosity but offer limited affective or spiritual engagement. Visitors are informed about the significance of solar and lunar alignments, yet the panels do not strongly evoke a sense of connection to the prehistoric people or the sacred dimension of the site.

This finding is consistent with the literature indicating that interpretation must balance cognitive and emotional engagement to maximize visitor impact (Nowacki, 2021; Wang et al., 2024). While Kokino panels encourage thought and learning, they do so primarily at an intellectual level, reflecting the panel design's academic orientation rather than a holistic experiential approach (Ababneh, 2018; Calzadillas, 2024).

Content scored the highest across all categories, confirming that panels successfully communicate the dual function of Kokino as a ritual site and megalithic observatory (4.0–4.5). The archaeological evidence, including platform structures, stone thrones, and solar/lunar markers, is clearly presented, demonstrating a strong alignment between factual evidence and interpretive narrative (Mitchell, 2018; Stankovski, 2007).

Moreover, panels link spatial features with temporal and ritual context, providing visitors with a coherent storyline about prehistoric practices. This coherence supports the principle that meaning derives from context, not isolated artifacts (Vos et al., 2021; Strupler, 2021).

A key limitation of this study is that, although the evaluation of Kokino's interpretive panels is grounded in an excellent theoretical and methodological framework based on established interpretive principles and models (Ham, 1992; Tilden, 1977; Ludwig, 2014; Pásková et al., 2021; Beck, 2011), it was conducted solely by experts and did not include direct input from local visitors. While this approach provides a strong academic benchmark, it does not capture the actual perceptions, engagement, or emotional responses of domestic audiences. Future research should incorporate surveys, interviews, or observational studies with local

residents and tourists to assess comprehension, relevance, and experiential impact, ensuring that interpretive improvements effectively align expert knowledge with visitor experience.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation of Kokino's interpretive panels shows that they successfully communicate scientifically accurate archaeological and archaeoastronomical information, providing a coherent narrative of the site's dual function as a ritual space and megalithic observatory (Mitchell, 2018; Stankovski, 2007; Nowacki, 2021). However, the panels are less effective in engaging domestic visitors, particularly younger audiences and non-specialists, due to dense academic text, limited visual diversity, and insufficient emotional or reflective prompts (Štrba & Palgutová, 2024; Ruchkys, 2025). Research emphasizes that domestic tourists respond best to interpretation that combines clear, accessible language with story-driven narratives, vivid visuals, and interactive or reflective elements that connect heritage to personal and local cultural contexts (Bruno & Wallace, 2019; Vičič et al., 2018; Roussou et al., 2017). Panels that integrate symbolic, ritual, and sensory dimensions alongside scientific content can foster deeper understanding, appreciation, and a sense of belonging for local audiences (Calzadillas, 2024; Štrba & Palgutová, 2024). Future research should include surveys, interviews, or age-segmented on-site observations of domestic visitors to guide iterative improvements, ensuring that Kokino's interpretation effectively bridges expert knowledge and meaningful experiences for local tourism (Light, 1995; Sundin et al., 2018).

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STRATEGIC FINANCIAL PLANNING AND FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN DOMESTIC TOURISM: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT: *While domestic tourism serves as an economic stabilizer during global instability, many local ventures operate on razor-thin margins, constantly vulnerable to seasonal shifts and currency fluctuations. Despite its role in job creation, the "financial endurance" of these firms is often sidelined in academic discourse, treated more as an afterthought than a core strategic priority.*

This paper addresses this gap by exploring the link between Strategic Financial Planning and long-term fiscal health. Moving beyond traditional bookkeeping, the study integrates modern frameworks such as Higgins' (1977) Sustainable Growth Model and the Resource-Based View (RBV). The analysis is structured around five pillars: optimizing long-term funding mixes, implementing dynamic budgeting, balancing purposeful cash flow, evaluating projects under uncertainty, and building consistent risk shields.

Using Snyder's (2019) methodology, a systematic review of 45 scholarly studies and industry reports was conducted. The findings reveal a troubling pattern: local tourism businesses frequently lack robust planning, relying instead on reactionary spending and short-term cash fixes. This "firefighting" approach gradually erodes their ability to survive economic downturns.

In conclusion, the study asserts that financial resilience is a product of deliberate foresight rather than luck. By shifting from reactive to proactive planning, businesses can achieve steady expansion. This research provides a fresh framework for leaders to improve tangible results and offers guidance for policymakers to design smarter public support systems for business resilience.

KEYWORDS: *Domestic Tourism, Strategic Financial Planning, Financial Sustainability, Sustainable Growth Rate, Economic Resilience.*

JELCODES: *L83, G32, Z32, M10, O16, G41*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism drives economies in many ways - it opens doors to employment, fuels growth in remote areas, one region at a time, yet also lifts national income through visitor spending. When world events shake cross-border travel, local trips step quietly into the spotlight. In uncertain times, people exploring their own countries keep money moving, businesses breathing, communities connected. Still, those small operators making it happen usually run on shaky funding, barely holding ground beneath them.

Facing sharp ups and downs in income, homegrown travel businesses must cope with unpredictable customer interest along with tight budgets locals often have. Though it sounds abstract, looking at things via the Resource-Based View shows how strengths inside a company - like know-how and skills - can shape success over time (Barney, 1991). For local tour operators, understanding money matters and thinking ahead isn't just paperwork - it acts like hidden strength shaping survival chances years down the line.

One reason money matters get overlooked in tourism studies? They're pushed aside by louder talks about nature and communities. Not every scholar treats finances seriously, some act like profits just happen if ads work or rooms fill up. Yet staying solvent means more than luck - it demands planning ahead. Think of it like planting trees knowing they'll need water years later. Higgins once pointed out: grow too fast without cash to back it, and things crack under pressure. That idea sticks today, especially when family trips rely on small local businesses. Without steady footing, those spots scramble week to week instead of building

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something lasting.

Getting money matters sorted helps close the gap. Using smart methods like ongoing budgets, predicting income and spending, also checking possible dangers lets local travel businesses plan ahead instead of just reacting when problems hit. Big global hotels usually have enough funds plus know-how to handle these advanced steps. Smaller homegrown companies though? They often lack that edge.

What this work looks at is the lack of attention given to long-term money health through strategy-making in local travel industries. Through a careful look at existing writings, it explores whether tools like spending forecasts and funding choices help businesses last longer. In the end, building an idea system here means leaders in home-based tourism might shift away from shaky yearly ups and downs toward something steadier, tougher, able to keep going.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a clear step by step look at past studies to explore how careful money planning connects with long term stability in local tourism. Instead of telling stories from sources, it builds on fixed steps that make findings reliable and open to checking. By following set rules, the process reduces personal slant while pulling together what is already known. It pushes further than just listing papers - its goal lands on spotting patterns in ideas and where understanding still falls short.

Data Collection and Search Strategy

Starting with ScienceDirect, the search expanded into Scopus, Google Scholar, but also pulled results from Emerald Insight - each chosen for wide academic credibility. Instead of limiting scope, terms like "domestic tourism" tied together with "strategic financial planning", helped widen coverage; so did phrases such as "financial sustainability", linked through logical filters. While Boolean methods shaped precision, words like "managerial finance in hospitality" paired alongside "liquidity management" brought sharper focus. A large volume of articles appeared at first glance, yet only those appearing in verified scholarly journals moved forward. What remained depended less on quantity, more on how well ideas fit within domestic tourism frameworks, plus meaningful theoretical grounding.

Screening and Selection Criteria

Aiming for strong academic performance led to a system with two steps. First came an initial check, then a closer review followed after

Three quarters of the way through, titles and abstracts got scanned first. Studies zoomed in only on green topics or community issues missed the cut - unless they touched money matters or leadership too.

Most papers got examined start to finish, just to see what they added to the big question - how planning methods shape tourism businesses over time. Only those written in English or Turkish made the cut, simply because fluency mattered for spotting patterns accurately.

Thematic Analysis and Synthesis

Patterns in the information came to light through Thematic Analysis - this way of working digs out common ideas hiding across responses. From there, meaning took shape slowly, shaped by repeated insights. Out of what emerged, five main directions formed naturally, each one holding up part of how money moves in local travel scenes

1.Capital Structure Optimization: Assessing the balance between equity and debt in a seasonal environment.

2.Advanced Budgeting Systems: Evaluating the shift from rigid annual budgets to flexible, rolling forecasts.

3.Liquidity and Cash Flow Management: Strategies for surviving off-season troughs.

Aim far ahead. Shift from daily firefighting to thinking three, maybe five years out financially. Picture where things could land way down the road instead of just fixing what broke today. Let time stretch decisions wider. Build choices now that echo later. Plan not for next week but for seasons still distant. Focus pull forward into a future built slowly.

When things get shaky at home, knowing what might go wrong helps. Spotting weak spots early means being ready if people suddenly stop buying. Bumpy times can come fast - planning ahead keeps systems running. Markets shift without warning so staying alert matters. Expecting surprises makes reacting easier.

Looking at studies grouped by theme, this review measures how often money troubles appear plus what harm quick thinking does to lasting strength in the field. Through this setup, solid ground forms under the results shown next.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Starting fresh each time, one study after another shows how local travel businesses stay strong when seasons shift and leaders make smart choices. Put together, these insights form four clear themes showing where real actions fall short of better plans.

1. The Trap of Living Paycheck to Paycheck

One after another, studies show small local travel companies stuck chasing quick cash wins. Not steady income but wild swings in customer numbers push them there. Missing varied funding options makes it worse. Instead of long-term planning, they react. Month to month survival takes over. Unpredictable spending by nearby travelers fuels the pattern. With no backup sources of money, margins stay thin. So decisions favor now over later. Each crisis deepens the habit.

Most of the time, leaders focus on having cash ready right now instead of building lasting worth. This keeps things running each day, yet still puts the company at risk when money troubles hit fast out of nowhere.

Most local companies lean heavily on borrowed money, often using brief bank financing to manage slow periods. This habit pushes their debt far above owner equity. Relying so much on loans can spark serious cash troubles down the road. Trouble builds when repayments pile up during weak seasons.

Most global brands use smart money strategies. Yet local companies usually miss out on thinking ahead financially - because they haven't built that inner sense of future planning. Over time, this quiet gap widens. Without it, staying even becomes harder. What big players do today shapes their edge tomorrow. Local ones react instead of shaping.

2. Reactive vs. Proactive Budgeting Systems

Budgeting habits differ sharply across firms, a key takeaway here. Not many homegrown travel businesses treat their budgets as living plans meant to guide growth - instead they act like financial brakes. Static spreadsheets dominate, used more for limiting spend than shaping direction.

When numbers drift too far off track, that is when changes usually happen - leaving little room to grab chances the market might offer. A shift comes only once trouble shows up, making moves slower than needed. After big money shifts appear, adjustments follow, but by then momentum may already be lost. Waiting until problems grow large means reacting instead of leading. Only once results fall way short does the plan get touched, limiting how fast things can change direction.

Few households actually use rolling forecasts or scenario planning, even though studies say these tools help manage uncertainty better. Moving ahead without them seems common, despite what experts recommend. Still, preparing budgets this way could make a difference when surprises hit home finances. Yet most families stick to older methods instead.

Facing the squeeze of peak seasons? Smart money moves help companies stretch or shrink expenses fast. Instead of reacting, they stay ahead when tourist numbers swing wildly. Budgets built with foresight handle these shifts without strain. Flexibility becomes a quiet advantage, not a last-minute scramble.

3. Cash Flow and Risk Integrated

When money moves smoothly, surprises happen less often. A steady rhythm in spending and saving keeps things balanced. Think of it like timing waves - catch them right, gaps shrink. Without pause, momentum builds where it matters most. Predictability slips in when steps are clear but not rigid. Money breathes easier when planned loosely around real life.

Beyond just tracking dollars, watching cash flow closely matters most when business slows down. Survival often hinges on handling day-to-day money well. Tough phases in travel demand test how firms manage their resources. Staying afloat means paying sharp attention to incoming and outgoing funds. Working capital becomes especially critical when tourist numbers drop.

Three out of four firms survive longer when they check risks ahead of time. Looking closely at how local price changes might affect them helps some companies stay afloat. Others who track shifts in borrowing costs tend to last too. Those who take time to map possible threats often keep going while others fade. Watching these numbers gives certain teams an edge without promising anything. Survival leans toward those who plan for what could go wrong.

Funding becomes easier when plans are clear. A well-laid path shows lenders the business is reliable, opening doors to better loan terms. Clear goals build trust, making investors more willing to step in. When numbers make sense, money follows without heavy pressure on interest.

4. Paths to financial sustainability

Now imagine money flow in local travel isn't fixed - it shifts, adapts, moves. Through the lens of the Resource-Based View, handling budgets becomes less about rigid plans, more about staying agile. Firms tweak what they have when the national economy wobbles. That flexibility? It counts as strength. Planning ahead turns into reshaping tools on the fly. Not just saving, but shifting - keeps businesses steady.

Firm stability shows up most clearly when expansion matches available resources - missteps happen if growth outpaces financial foundations, especially visible in tourist hotspots chasing quick scale.

Three quarters of the way through, it becomes clear - better financial oversight makes a difference when local businesses grow beyond just family control. When rules around money handling get clearer, those companies find it easier to act like real organizations instead of personal projects. Clarity in leadership decisions opens doors to long-term survival, especially once relatives aren't the only ones making choices. Without clean records and open practices, scaling up feels shaky at best. Real structure takes hold only when accountability replaces tradition.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This deep look at past studies shows Strategic Financial Planning shapes how well homegrown travel businesses stay financially healthy. Though local tourism supports the economy during rough patches, the companies behind it frequently struggle due to weak

management - often stuck handling day-to-day fires instead of planning ahead. Shifting from just getting by to building lasting success means using smarter money strategies that match where the business wants to be years down the road.

Key Conclusions

Putting together what's been written points to these main takeaways:

Fractions of certainty emerge when households map out travel spending ahead of time. Not luck, rather routine check-ins on expected income steer choices through busy and quiet months alike. When weather shifts or events cancel, having backup outlines helps keep trips alive. Instead of guessing, families sketch possible costs under different conditions - this shapes how money moves toward stays, meals, rides. Planning month by month builds steadier paths than hoping for smooth waves.

Three-fourths of smart resource choices come down to seeing money knowledge as a hidden strength. When companies treat financial know-how like a real tool, they balance funding better. This kind of insight cuts the need for expensive, quick loans. Instead of reacting, they shape how cash flows through operations. Clear thinking about finances shifts priorities without loud announcements. Knowledge quietly replaces costly borrowing.

Built on different income paths, a business finds steadier footing when quiet times hit. Shifting investments wisely spreads risk across areas that don't all fall at once. This balance helps money move more predictably through lean stretches. Rather than relying on one source, spreading effort cushions sudden drops. Calmer financial swings come from structure, not luck.

Most digital shifts now rely on financial tech tools. These systems track data live, offering clearer insights faster. Because of that, spotting threats early becomes possible. Clear updates help teams respond before small issues grow. Accuracy improves when information flows without delay.

Recommendations

Looking at everything together, here's what comes next for those working in practice, policy, or study - thoughts shaped by what emerged along the way

Three Quarters for Business Managers

Budgets need constant updates instead of fixed yearly plans because local buyers react quickly to price changes. Shifting prices shape spending habits every month. Forecasts adjusting each quarter catch these shifts better than old models. Markets move fast when costs rise or drop suddenly. Planning ahead means watching trends weekly rather than waiting twelve months.

Liquidity needs a cushion. Set aside money when business is strong. This stash kicks in when activity slows. Think of it as backup fuel for quiet periods. Money saved earlier keeps things running later. Strong months support leaner ones. The goal? Stay steady without leaning on debt. A reserve built on surplus prevents strain down the road.

For Policy Makers:

Funding know-how matters most. Instead of pouring money into buildings alone, officials could back programs that teach small tourism businesses how to handle cash better. Learning budgeting beats new facilities when survival is at stake. Skills grow value faster than bricks do. Training builds lasting strength where loans might fail. Smarter money habits help firms last longer. When owners understand finance, entire communities gain ground.

One way to help local tourism grow is by connecting funding to clear environmental, social, and governance practices. When businesses share honest updates on these areas, investors may feel more confident staying involved. Support follows accountability, especially when it comes to lasting success. Tying aid to openness pushes companies to act with greater responsibility over time. Better reporting doesn't just look good - it builds trust that lasts beyond

short-term gains.

For Future Research:

A third of the way through validation - research ahead ought to step past summaries of earlier work, instead pulling numbers into view. One look could track how certain money strategies link to family-run tour businesses staying open. Down the line, data might show which tools actually hold up over years.

Three quarters of the way through, it becomes clear that looking at how smart machines plus massive information shape predictions in tourist spots with strong seasonal swings opens new paths to explore.

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PROSPECTS AND PERILS: THE DUAL REALITY OF DOMESTIC TOURISM CONSUMPTION IN GHANA'S REMOTE WORK ERA

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ABSTRACT: *The rapid expansion of remote work following the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed work patterns, mobility and travel behavior worldwide. Extensive studies have examined remote work and tourism in developed economies, limited empirical research exists on how remote work influences domestic tourism consumption in developing countries. This study therefore investigates the prospects and perils of remote work on domestic tourism consumption, focusing on staff of Takoradi Technical University. A quantitative research approach was adopted using a cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected from 303 respondents through a structured questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and exploratory factor analysis with the aid of SPSS. The findings reveal that remote work is gradually influencing domestic tourism behavior by increasing travel flexibility, altering travel timing and influencing accommodation choices. However, the integration of work and leisure travel remains relatively limited among respondents. Factor analysis identified five key prospects associated with remote work for domestic tourism development: destination expansion, industry development, tourism demand growth, accommodation and digital infrastructure development and long-term tourism sustainability. At the same time, six major perils were identified, including infrastructure and cultural pressure, economic and environmental concerns, cost and regulatory barriers, transport and sustainability risks, workspace suitability issues and unreliable power and internet connectivity. The study concludes that remote work presents both opportunities and challenges for domestic tourism development in Ghana. While remote work can stimulate tourism demand and diversify destinations, infrastructure limitations and regulatory gaps may hinder its full potential. The study recommends strategic investment in digital infrastructure, reliable electricity supply, transport systems, and work-friendly tourism facilities to enable Ghana's tourism sector to benefit from emerging remote work trends.*

KEYWORDS: *Remote work, Domestic tourism, Tourism development, Digital infrastructure*

Background of the Study

Remote work saw an upsurge during the COVID-19 era (Callaway et al., 2021) which has reshaped how people work, live and travel these days. Remote work introduces greater flexibility in location and time (Choudhury et al., 2021), enabling employees to carry out their professional duties outside the traditional office time and working environment. This shift of work has effects on travel characteristics which comprise non-work trips and travel mobility of respondents. This means that workers combine work with leisure activities. Thus work and vacation are blended leading to new trends "Workations". This implies that the tourism industry is experiencing considering transformation which can also be described as "hybrid tourism''. Hybrid tourism is when traditional travel is blend with modern travel experience (Sutarya, 2024).

The idea of remote work travel and its influence on tourism has received increasing attention globally (Chevtaeva et al., 2024), research has showed that remote work is only centred in developed countries. However, there is limited academic focus on how these trends occur in developing countries, and particularly in Ghana, where domestic tourism has traditionally been dominated by social and cultural motives rather than work-linked travel patterns. Domestic tourism in Ghana remains largely driven by social connections, community involvement and student travels (Asiedu, 2023). The study population is increasing adapting hybrid work pattern comprising online and face to face lecture sessions this situation compels of this research comprising Takoradi Technical University workforce to practice remote work.

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Given that Takoradi Technical University lecturers participate in domestic travels. Research of this kind is compelling and necessary for the assessment of work and vacations patterns among university lecturers in Ghana.

Given this context, remote work presents both prospects and perils for domestic tourism consumption in Ghana. Remote work can stimulate domestic tourism by allowing greater flexibility in travel timing (Floričić & Pavia, 2021) and the exploration of less conventional destinations, potentially supporting economic activity in hospitality, transport, and local services. The shift also poses risks including digital and infrastructure barriers that may limit remote workers' ability to travel, sustainability challenges due to uneven tourism growth, and inequalities in who can benefit from remote work–linked tourism (Zeqiri, et al., 2025). These dual realities open the need for empirical study in the Ghanaian context, particularly focusing on how remote work influences domestic tourism behaviour, what opportunities it presents for industry development, and what challenges may undermine sustainable benefits.

This study thus aims to fill these gaps by investigating how remote work influences domestic tourism consumption, opportunities it offers for tourism development, and the perils that could undermine travel patterns and behaviours.

LITERATURE

Domestic Tourism Consumption and Remote Work

Okoli et al. (2024) stated that remote work has basically altered traditional patterns of work and mobility. Popovici and Popovici, (2020) define remote work as a flexible work arrangement that allows employees to perform tasks outside conventional office environments through the use digital technologies. Grzegorczyk, et al., 2021 observed that Remote and hybrid work models have become institutionalized across many industries and sectors. This structural shift impact on travel behavior and domestic tourism consumption in the country as observed by zubairh (2026).

There remote work offers flexible spatial mobility and therefore continues to reshapes daily mobility. As the patterns of reducing commuting frequencies reduce the phenomenon also generate changes in terms of redistribution in travel patterns (Clarke, 2025). Workers who are no longer required to commute daily may reallocate saved time and financial resources toward discretionary travel activities while they work remotely. In this regard, remote work may stimulate non-work travel, which includes domestic leisure trips.

Fritsch, et al (2025) have observed that remote workers often demonstrate greater autonomy in choosing when and where to travel. This enables the blending of work responsibilities with leisure activities, which gives rise to new tourism consumption patterns such as extended stays, mid-week travel and "workations". Unlike traditional vacations, workations involve working remotely from a leisure destination while simultaneously engaging in tourism experiences or activities. These patterns yield solution to the issue of challenge of seasonality in the tourism industry as it turns to increase demand for recommendation beyond weekend peaks and domestic tourism markets.

In the assertion of Rogerson and Rogerson (2021) that remote work may support more localized tourism systems by encouraging residents to explore different destinations domestically rather than engaging in international travel. When there is global uncertainty, this shift favours and strengthen, domestic tourism resilience.

However, Okmi, et al. (2025) indicate that the relationship between remote work and domestic tourism consumption is not uniform across many contexts. Challenges such as Infrastructure quality, digital connectivity, electricity reliability and affordability can significantly influence the feasibility of remote work while traveling (Isreal, 2025; Davies,

2021). In developing economies, where digital infrastructure may be unevenly distributed, the capacity of destinations to attract remote-working tourists depends heavily on technological readiness. Without reliable internet and conducive workspaces, the potential tourism benefits of remote work could be constrained.

Domestic tourism has traditionally been driven by social, cultural and heritage motivations (Bayih, & Singh, 2020) yet, the increasing adoption of hybrid work models among professionals particularly university staff and knowledge-based workers introduce a new dimension in tourism consumption patterns. The flexibility of remote work may encourage longer stays in destinations such as coastal towns, eco-tourism sites and heritage centers, provided that digital and hospitality infrastructure meets work-related needs of individuals.

Influence of Remote Work on Domestic Tourism Behaviour

Traditional patterns of mobility and travel behavior- is yielding to rapid expansion due to the influence of remote work. Remote work, which allows employees to perform job responsibilities outside officially designated work settings to preferred environmental settings with the use of information and communication technologies. This has reshaped how people organise their time, activities, and travel decisions (Leonardi et al. 2024).

Flexibility in remote work, where and when work is done can lead to significant changes in travel patterns (Chatterjee & Crawford, 2021). Remote workers often eliminate or reduce daily commuting, which then saves time to be reallocated to non-work travel and leisure activities (Beňo, 2023). Remote work increases discretionary travel opportunities were hybrid work arrangements are associated with greater numbers of non-work trips compared to fully remote or fully in-person work plans (Speroni & Taylor, 2023).

Choudhury et al. (2021) indicated that remote work frees workers from rigid office constraints, and individuals gain increased autonomy in travel timing and destination preferences. This flexibility in work schedules enable longer stays at destinations and promote mid-week travel, which contribute to more frequent and diversified domestic tourism participation among workers. Remote work with leisure experiences can foster unique travel behaviours that differ from normal traditional vacation patterns. Thompson (2019) suggest that people engaging in extended stays at leisure destinations while working remotely often prioritise locations that facilitate both productivity and leisure. This changes the usual determinants of tourism consumption behaviour. The phenomena of remote work and its linked to travel behaviours is not only a post-pandemic phenomenon but part of a broader transformation in how travel and work intersect. Remote work is increasingly becoming a mainstream pattern, enhanced by consumer expectations and preferences for travel products and services such as work-friendly accommodation and digital infrastructure (Oluwamayowa et al., 2024). Remote work influences travel behaviour (Chalabi & Dia, 2024) by integrating work-related needs such as reliable internet and comfortable workspaces into destination selection and stay duration, underscoring the shift from purely recreational tourism to hybrid travel behaviours that blend work and leisure.

Prospects of Remote Work for Domestic Tourism Development

Remote work has not only transformed how work is organised but also created new opportunities for tourism consumption (Vila & Carles, 2025). As remote work dissociates employment from fixed office locations, it allows individuals to work from virtually anywhere thereby opening up novel avenues for tourism engagement (Krishn, 2024). This connection of 'workation' has significant benefits for domestic tourism markets, particularly in terms of demand patterns of individuals.

Remote work also impact demand for domestic tourism services by enabling longer stays at leisure destinations. This is one of the primary prospects associated with remote work

(Floričić & Pavia, 2021). Traditional tourism trips are constrained by fixed vacation periods, while remote work allows individuals to extend their visits while remaining productive, a trend encapsulated in the emerging concept of 'workations' a hybrid form of travel that blends work and vacation experiences (Khongsawatkiat & Agmapisarn, 2024). This flexibility can help tourism actors address one of the perennial challenges of the sector that is seasonality. Remote workers making mid-week or extended visits can spread demand more evenly across the calendar, improving occupancy rates for accommodation providers and stabilising revenue streams beyond peak holiday periods.

Pavia, et al., (2022) observed that remote work encourages innovation in tourism products and services leading to innovative destination marketing strategies and are increasingly recognising the need to cater to this changing consumer segment by providing integrating work-friendly facilities such as high-speed internet, co-working spaces, and flexible check-in arrangements into destination offerings (Morace, 2018). Such innovations not only enhance destination competitiveness but also attract professionals seeking environments that balance productivity with relaxation, thus expanding the array of the types of tourism experiences.

Remote work reduces the necessity of residing in major cities, enables professionals to explore less traditional or rural destinations for both work and leisure (Krishn, 2024). This shift can foster more geographically dispersed tourism growth, directing economic benefits to local communities that have historically been excluded from mainstream tourism circuits. The rise of digital nomadism and remote –work- tourism. Highlight the that mobility afforded by technology can generate considerable economic effects for both urban and peripheral destinations, as remote workers spend on accommodation, food, services and local experiences (Krishn, 2024; Arslan, 2024).

The blending of work and travel encourages higher levels of cultural interaction and local engagement. Remote workers spending extended periods in host destinations are more likely to participate in local activities and contribute to cultural exchange, thereby deepening the socio-economic linkages between visitors and host communities. As some countries and regions adopt policies to attract remote workers, the tourism sector is adapting to accommodate this new segment, illustrating the strategic importance of remote- work to tourism development (Sánchez-Vergara, et al 2023).

Perils of Remote Work for Domestic Tourism Development

Though remote work presents exciting prospects for domestic tourism, it also introduces several challenges that can undermine tourism development.

A major concern is the strain on infrastructure and services in host destinations (Dodds, & Butler, 2019). Remote workers typically require reliable digital connectivity, stable power supply, and conducive work environments to remain productive while away from traditional offices. However, many tourism regions especially in developing countries lack such infrastructure, making it difficult for remote workers to sustain both professional and leisure activities (Igoumenakis, et al 2023). Demand for high-speed internet rises at destinations not originally designed for this purpose, thus local networks may become overwhelmed, leading to inconsistent connectivity and reduced satisfaction among visitors and locals.

Remote work linked to tourism create socioeconomic pressures. Krishn, (2024) explained that Digital nomads and remote workers reflect an influx of individuals with higher spending power can drive up the cost of living, making housing and everyday services less affordable for local residents. In some destinations, property owners may convert long-term rentals into short-term accommodation to cater to remote workers, which can reduce housing availability for locals.

Socio-cultural challenges also emerge when remote workers integrate into tourism destinations without sufficient engagement with local communities (Gomes, 2025). Butler (2017) cite that interactions between remote workers and host communities, leads to dilute the authenticity of tourism experiences and create disconnects between visitors and residents.

Environmental pressures constitute another category of peril. Although longer stays by remote workers might increase peak season crowding, they can still place continuous strain on natural resources, waste management systems, and local ecosystems if tourism growth is not guided by sustainability principles. Unmanaged visitor influx has been linked to deteriorating environmental quality; when blended with remote work, this dynamic may extend year-round, complicating destination stewardship and resource planning (Bisht et al., 2025).

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey design. The quantitative approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to investigate the phenomena by analyzing numerical data to identify patterns measure the influence of remote work flexibility on domestic tourism consumption, assess its prospects and identify associated perils. The cross-sectional design allowed data to be collected from respondents at a single point in time among staff of Takoradi Technical University. The quantitative design was appropriate for collecting measurable data that could be analyzed statistically to understand patterns and perceptions of behaviors. Takoradi Technical University served as the study area. The target population comprised university staff (both academic and non-academic) who have experienced or are currently engaged in remote or hybrid work arrangements. University staff were selected because increasingly the work structure is been incorporated with remote flexibility. This makes the target population stable respondents for examining emerging domestic tourism consumption patterns in the remote work era.

The study used a sample size of **303 respondents**. This sample size is statistically adequate for multivariate analysis such as factor analysis. A **probability sampling technique** such as stratified sampling was used to ensure representativeness in each of the department or sections. Purposive sampling approach was also to select staff from each of the departments or sections in the University. The data were collected using a structured questionnaire divided into three sections: Section A: Influence of remote work on domestic tourism behavior, Section B: Prospects of remote work for domestic tourism development, Section C: Perils associated with domestic tourism consumption in the remote work era. Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree. The Likert scale was chosen to measure perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral tendencies quantitatively.

After data collection, responses were coded and analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences v 2023). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were used to describe the Influence of remote work on domestic tourism behavior. In addition, exploratory factor analysis using principal component analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to identify underlying dimensions within prospects and perils of domestic tourism consumption.

Results and findings

Table 1 examines how remote work affects domestic tourism behaviour among staff of TTU. The overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.736 indicates acceptable internal consistency on the variables used, signifying the items reliably measure the construct. Majority of respondents 58.1%, indicated that remote work allows them to travel more frequently within destinations in

Ghana. This advocates that flexible work structures are beginning to support increased mobility among workers in Ghana. With regards to considering domestic destinations, they previously did not visit, nearly half 48.8% considered domestic destinations they previously did not visit. This indicates moderate behavioural expansion attributable to remote work.

On the 'combination of official duties with leisure travel', most respondents 69.6%, disagreed that remote work enables them to combine leisure travel. This finding is critical despite flexibility; practical integration of work and tourism remains limited. A plurality 46.9% of respondents disagreed that 'flexible work arrangements have increased their participation in domestic tourism activities'. This suggests that flexibility alone does not automatically translate into higher tourism engagement. Respondents indicated that 'remote work has changed the timing of their domestic travel' with half of 49.5% of its respondents agreeing to its. This indicates a stronger positive influence compared to many other items, implying remote work affects when people travel more than whether they travel.

Table 1: Influence of Remote Work on Domestic Tourism Behaviour of TTU Staff

Influence	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Mean**	**S D**	**C.A**
Remote work flexibility allows me to travel more frequently within Ghana	176(58.1%)	91(30.0%)	36(11.9%)	2.46	0.698	
Because of remote work, I now consider domestic tourism destinations that I previously did not visit	148(48.8%)	95(31.4%)	60(19.8%)	2.29	0.777	
Remote work enables me to combine official duties with leisure travel within Ghana	38(12.5%)	54(17.8%)	211(69.6%)	2.57	0.705	
Flexible work arrangements have increased my participation in domestic tourism activities	72(23.8%)	89(29.4%)	142(46.9%)	2.23	0.809	0.736
Remote work has changed the timing of my domestic travel	150(49.5%)	86(28.4%)	67(22.1%)	1.73	0.802	
I am able to extend my stay at domestic tourism destinations because of remote work	60(19.8%)	73(24.1%)	170(56.1%)	2.36	0.793	
Remote work has increased my overall spending on domestic tourism activities	152(50.2%)	65(21.5%)	86(28.4%)	1.78	0.861	
I am more likely to choose destinations with good internet connectivity due to remote work needs.	104(34.3%)	62(20.5%)	137(45.2%)	2.11	0.887	
Remote work has influenced my choice of accommodation when traveling within Ghana.	134(44.2%)	89(29.4%)	80(26.4%)	1.83	0.823	

Source: Field work, 2026

More than half of respondents 56.1% disagreed that 'remote work allows them to extend their stay at tourist destinations'. This suggests constraints such as workload, connectivity, or employer expectations still limit longer work-from-destination trips.

On the 'domestic tourism spending' 50.2% of respondents agreed that remote work has increased their domestic tourism spending. This is an encouraging economic signal, indicating that those who do travel may spend more. Responses were divided, but a larger share of 45.2% disagreed that they are more likely to 'choose destinations based on internet connectivity'. This implies that digital infrastructure, while important, is not yet the dominant determinant for most travellers. A notable proportion 44.2% of respondents agreed that 'remote work has influenced their accommodation choices'. This suggests emerging demand for work-friendly lodging features.

Table 2: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's Test on prospects of remote work for domestic tourism consumption

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.616
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1314.874
	df	105
	Sig.	0.000

Source: Field work, 2026

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test were conducted to assess whether the dataset is appropriate for factor analysis. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy produced a value of 0.616. This value exceeds the minimum recommended threshold of 0.60, indicating that the sample is adequate for factor analysis.

The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity yielded an approximate chi-square of 1314.874 with 105 degrees of freedom and a significance level of p = 0.000. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the result is statistically significant.

Table 3: Total Variance Explained on prospects of remote work for domestic tourism consumption

Component	**Initial Eigenvalues**			**Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings**		
	Total	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative %**	**Total**	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative %**
1	3.227	21.513	21.513	2.487	16.577	16.577
2	2.161	14.408	35.921	2.478	16.521	33.098
3	1.862	12.412	48.333	2.088	13.919	47.017
4	1.404	9.359	57.692	1.426	9.508	56.525
5	1.173	7.819	65.511	1.348	8.986	65.511
6	.902	6.016	71.527			
7	.760	5.070	76.596			
8	.672	4.480	81.077			
9	.633	4.217	85.294			
10	.536	3.573	88.867			
11	.456	3.043	91.910			
12	.420	2.803	94.713			
13	.282	1.883	96.596			
14	.262	1.749	98.345			
15	.248	1.655	100.000			

Source: Field work, 2026

The total variance explained table presents the factor extraction results for the prospects of remote work in relation to domestic tourism consumption. The analysis uses the kaiser criterion eigenvalues greater than 1 to determine the number of meaningful components.

Five components have eigenvalues greater than 1 (3.227, 2.161, 1.862, 1.404, and 1.173). This indicates that five underlying factors explain the prospects of remote work for domestic tourism consumption in Ghana. The remaining components have eigenvalues below 1 and were therefore not retained.

The five components explained a cumulative variance of 65.511%, which is considered satisfactory in social science research. The first component alone accounted for 21.513%, indicating it is the most dominant factor. The results indicate that the prospects of remote work for domestic tourism consumption are multidimensional, not driven by a single dominant construct.

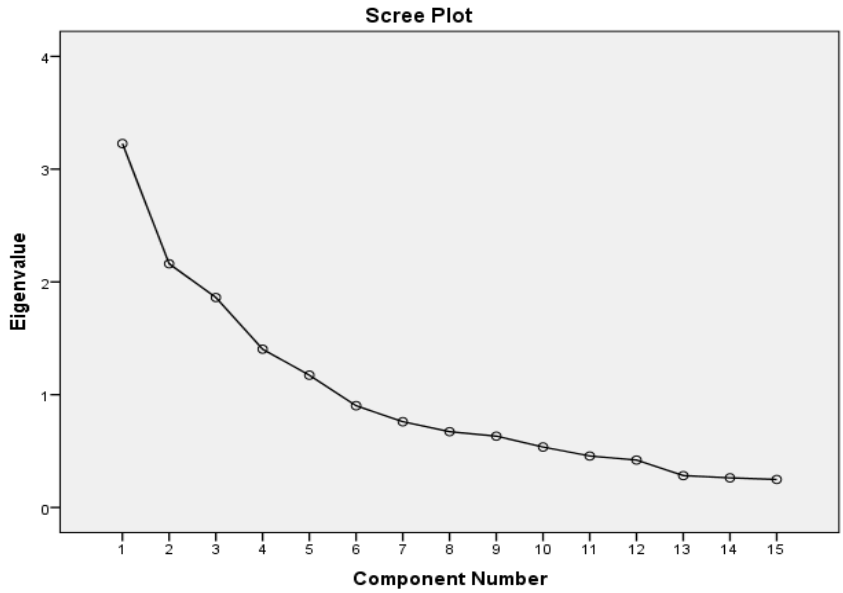

Figure 1: Scree Plot of Prospects of Remote Work for Domestic Tourism Consumption
Source: Field work, 2026

The scree plot displays the eigenvalues against the component numbers to help determine the appropriate number of factors to retain. The scree plot confirms that the prospects of remote work for domestic tourism consumption are best explained by five underlying dimensions using eigenvalue greater than one.

The rotated component matrix reveals the underlying dimensions explaining the prospects of remote work for domestic tourism consumption in Ghana. Five factors were extracted, jointly accounting for 65.511% of the total variance. All items loaded above the recommended threshold of 0.50, indicating strong construct validity. The Cronbach's alpha values for the five factors range from 0.700 to 0.741, confirming acceptable internal reliability.

The first factor named 'Destination Expansion' with explained variance of 21.513% and Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.741$. This factor reflects the spatial and temporal redistribution potential of remote work within domestic tourism. The strongest loading is for: remote work encourages travel to less popular destinations (0.827), supports growth of work-friendly hotels (0.725), helps reduce seasonality (0.694), encourages longer stays (0.516). Remote work is perceived as a driver of destination diversification and more balanced tourism flows across locations and seasons.

Table 4: Rotated Component Matrix on the prospects of remote work for domestic tourism consumption

Factors	Mean	SD	Factor loading	Explained Variance (%)	Cronbach's alpha
Factor 1: Destination Expansion				**21.513**	**0.741**
• Remote work encourages travel to less popular destinations.	2.69	0.585	0.827		
• Supports growth of work-friendly hotels	2.65	0.589	0.725		
• Helps reduce seasonality.	2.69	0.637	0.694		
• Encourages longer stays.	2.67	0.591	0.516		
Factor 2: Industry Development				**35.921**	**0.702**
• Enhances innovation	2.18	0.843	0.784		
• Creates employment	2.33	0.735	0.733		
• Contributes to local economic	2.43	0.728	0.565		
• Strengthens competitiveness	2.18	0.843	0.538		
• Promotes co-working facilities	2.39	0.802	0.513		
Factor 3: Tourism Demand				**48.333**	**0.725**
• Creates new domestic tourism opportunities	2.57	0.714	0.767		
• Increases spending on activities	2.15	0.810	0.710		
• Attracts new tourist segment	2.51	0.736	0.546		
Factor 4: Accommodation and Digital Infrastructure				**57.692**	**0.700**
• Increases accommodation spending	2.73	0.539	0.799		
• Encourages reliable internet/work spaces	2.10	0.906	0.597		
Factor 5: Long-Term Tourism Sustainability				**65.511**	
• Supports long-term growth.	1.97	0.915	0.838		

Source: Field work, 2026

Industry Development with Cumulative Variance: 35.921%, Cronbach's α = 0.702 are the second factor. This factor captures the broader economic and structural opportunities remote work creates for the tourism industry. Key loadings include: enhances innovation (0.784), creates employment (0.733), contributes to local economy (0.565), strengthens competitiveness (0.538), promotes co-working facilities (0.513). Remote work is moderately viewed as a catalyst for tourism sector modernization, job creation and local economic stimulation.

With regards to factor 3 'Tourism Demand' with Cumulative Variance of 48.333% , Cronbach's α = 0.725. This dimension reflects demand-side growth prospects. Major loadings are: creates new domestic tourism opportunities (0.767), increases spending on activities (0.710), attracts new tourist segment (0.546). Respondents believe remote work can expand the domestic tourism market and attract new traveler segments, though the perceived strength of this effect is moderate.

On factor 4, 'Accommodation and Digital Infrastructure' with Cumulative Variance: 57.692%, Cronbach's α = 0.700. This factor highlights the enabling role of hospitality services

and connectivity. Key items measured include: increases accommodation spending (0.799), encourages reliable internet/workspaces (0.597). The relatively high loading for accommodation spending suggests financial implications for lodging providers. The growth of remote work is linked to increased demand for digitally equipped, work-friendly accommodation facilities in Ghana.

Factor 5 shows on the 'Long-Term Tourism Sustainability' with Cumulative Variance: 65.511%, Cronbach's α = 0.708. This factor represents the strategic, future-oriented benefits of remote work. Supports long-term growth (0.838). Although remote work is theoretically associated with sustainable tourism growth, respondents remain somewhat uncertain about its long-term impact in the Ghanaian context.

Table 5: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's Test on Perils Associated with Domestic Tourism Consumption in the Remote Work Era

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.608
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	4387.689
	df	105
	Sig.	0.000

Source: Field work, 2026

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test were conducted to assess whether the dataset is suitable for factor analysis. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy produced a value of 0.608. This value is above the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.60, indicating that the sample is adequate for factor analysis, though the adequacy is considered moderate.

The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity yielded an approximate chi-square value of 4387.689 with 105 degrees of freedom and a significance level of p = 0.000. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the test is statistically significant.

Table 6: Total Variance Explained on Perils Associated with Domestic Tourism Consumption in the Remote Work Era

Component	**Initial Eigenvalues**			**Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings**		
	Total	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative %**	**Total**	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative %**
1	3.448	22.986	22.986	2.245	14.967	14.967
2	2.400	15.997	38.983	2.234	14.894	29.861
3	1.890	12.600	51.583	2.189	14.596	44.457
4	1.492	9.949	61.531	2.135	14.232	58.689
5	1.262	8.412	69.943	1.437	9.581	68.270
6	1.093	7.284	77.228	1.344	8.958	77.228
7	.814	5.426	82.654			
8	.718	4.789	87.443			
9	.573	3.817	91.260			
10	.514	3.427	94.687			
11	.389	2.596	97.283			
12	.377	2.513	99.795			
13	.018	.121	99.916			
14	.010	.068	99.984			
15	.002	.016	100.000			

Source: Field work, 2026

The Total Variance Explained table shows how much of the total variability in the data is accounted for by each extracted component and helps determine the number of meaningful factors.

Using the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalue > 1), the first six components were retained because their eigenvalues exceed 1. The six retained components together explained 77.2% of the total variance. In social science research, anything above 60% is considered good, so 77.2% indicates very strong explanatory power.

The first component alone explained 22.986%, making it the most dominant underlying factor. The results indicate that the perils associated with domestic tourism consumption in the remote work era are highly multidimensional, consisting of six meaningful underlying factors.

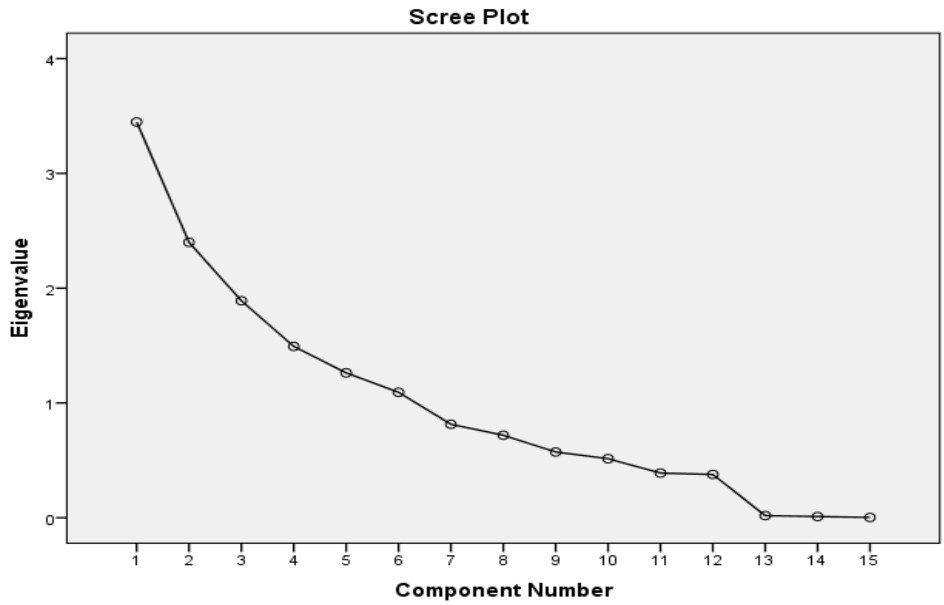

Figure 2: Scree Plot on Perils Associated with Domestic Tourism Consumption in the Remote Work Era

The scree plot displays the eigenvalues against the component numbers to help determine the appropriate number of factors to retain. The scree plot confirms that the perils of remote work for domestic tourism consumption are best explained by six underlying dimensions using eigenvalue greater than one.

The rotated component matrix identifies the key underlying dimensions' perils associated with domestic tourism consumption in the remote work era. Six factors were extracted, jointly explaining 77.228% of the total variance. The Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.716 to 0.797, demonstrating acceptable to good internal reliability across the factors.

Factor 1 mentioned as 'infrastructure and Cultural Pressure' with explained Variance: 22.986%, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.716$. This factor captures concerns about how increased domestic tourism linked to remote work may strain infrastructure and local culture. Key loadings include: increased visitation may negatively affect local cultural practices (0.936), limited availability of co-working facilities discourages remote work tourism (0.934), and inadequate digital infrastructure reduces attractiveness (0.589). Respondents were worried that growth in remote work tourism could pressure cultural integrity and expose infrastructure gaps.

Table 7: Rotated Component Matrix on Perils Associated with Domestic Tourism Consumption in the Remote Work Era

Factors	Mean	SD	Factor loading	Explained Variance (%)	Cronbach's alpha
Factor 1: Infrastructure and Cultural Pressure				**22.986**	**0.716**
• Increased visitation may negatively affect local cultural practices	1.96	0.802	0.936		
• Limited availability of co-working facilities discourages remote work tourism	2.29	0.843	0.934		
• Inadequate digital infrastructure reduces attractiveness	2.47	0.792	0.589		
Factor 2: Economic and Environmental Concerns				38.983	**0.746**
• Tourism affordable only to limited group	2.43	0.802	0.768		
• Poor waste management threat	2.33	0.735	0.861		
• Environmental degradation risk	2.43	0.728	0.813		
• High cost of internet data	2.18	0.843	0.903		
Factor 3: Cost and Regulatory Barriers				**51.583**	**0.755**
• High accommodation costs	2.29	0.845	0.944		
• Growth not adequately regulated	2.29	0.851	0.939		
Factor 4: Transport and Long-Term Sustainability Risks				**61.531**	**0.774**
• Transportation challenges	2.34	0.763	0.978		
• Long-term sustainability challenges	2.33	0.762	0.977		
Factor 5: Workspace Suitability Issues				**69.943**	**…**
• Inadequate workspaces affect productivity	2.32	0.818	0.838		
Factor 6: Power and Internet Reliability Problems				**77.228**	**0.797**
• Unreliable electricity supply	2.31	0.847	0.811		
• Poor internet connectivity	2.22	0.829	0.707		

Source: Field work, 2026

On the 'Economic and Environmental Concerns' as factor 2, Cumulative Variance: 38.983%, Cronbach's α = 0.746. This factor reflects affordability and environmental sustainability worries. With loadings made up of tourism affordable only to limited group (0.768), poor waste management threat (0.861), environmental degradation risk (0.813), high cost of internet data (0.903). The relatively high loadings suggest strong perceived risks. Remote work driven tourism may widen inequality and intensify environmental management challenges if not properly controlled.

On factor 3 as 'Cost and Regulatory Barriers' Cumulative Variance: 51.583%, Cronbach's α = 0.755. This factor highlights financial obstacles: High accommodation costs (0.944), Growth not adequately regulated (0.939). These very high loadings indicate strong consensus among respondents. Rising costs and weak regulatory oversight are viewed as major threats to sustainable domestic tourism growth in the remote work era.

Factor 4 as labeled as 'Transport and Long-Term Sustainability Risks', Cumulative Variance: 61.531%, Cronbach's α = 0.774. This factor focuses on mobility and future viability concerns: Transportation challenges (0.978), Long-term sustainability challenges (0.977). These are extremely strong loadings, showing this is a critical risk area. Poor transport systems and uncertainty about long-term sustainability are major perceived perils for remote work–supported tourism.

Factor 5 'Workspace Suitability Issues', Cumulative Variance: 69.943% This factor addresses productivity concerns: Inadequate workspaces affect productivity (0.838). The lack of suitable work environments is seen as a meaningful barrier to effective remote work tourism in Ghana.

With regards to factor 6 named 'Power and Internet Reliability Problems', Cumulative Variance: 77.228%, Cronbach's α = 0.797. This factor highlights core technological reliability risks: Unreliable electricity supply (0.811), Poor internet connectivity (0.707). Stable power and internet remain fundamental constraints that could undermine the success of remote work–driven domestic tourism.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that remote work is gradually reshaping domestic tourism behaviour among university workforce, although its influence remains uneven. While flexibility associated with remote work has begun to alter travel timing, destination consideration and spending patterns, the integration of work and leisure travel is still limited in practice. The factor analysis further reveals that remote work presents meaningful prospects for domestic tourism development particularly through destination expansion, industry innovation and emerging demand segments. These opportunities are counterbalanced by significant perils, including infrastructure gaps, cost and regulatory barriers, environmental concerns and persistent power and internet reliability challenges. The findings suggest that remote work holds promising but conditional potential for domestic tourism growth in Ghana, requiring coordinated investments in digital infrastructure, transport systems, regulatory frameworks and work-friendly tourism facilities to fully realize sustainable benefits.

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DIGITAL STORYTELLING OF SACRED HERITAGE: A STRATEGY TO ATTRACT YOUNG DOMESTIC TOURISTS

Mohinur Kurbanova[1]

ABSTRACT: *Pilgrimage tourism is a significant aspect of Uzbekistan's cultural heritage; however, numerous sacred sites remain underrepresented on digital platforms and struggle to attract younger domestic tourists. This study explores the potential of digital storytelling as a strategy to increase young people's interest in visiting pilgrimage destinations in the Bukhara region. A qualitative approach was adopted, employing semi-structured interviews with 18 participants, including young tourists aged 18–35, social media content creators, and local tourism practitioners. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Findings indicate that emotionally engaging and authentic short-form video narratives significantly enhance awareness and willingness to visit domestic pilgrimage destinations among young audiences. However, structural barriers such as the lack of coordinated digital strategies and limited infrastructure hinder systematic implementation. The study offers practical recommendations for integrating digital storytelling into pilgrimage tourism promotion.*

KEYWORDS: *digital storytelling, pilgrimage tourism, sacred heritage, domestic tourism, young tourists, Uzbekistan*

INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan possesses a rich collection of sacred heritage sites that have served as pilgrimage destinations for centuries. The Bukhara region in particular is known for its historically and spiritually significant shrines, mausoleums, and religious complexes. Pilgrimage tourism is one of the oldest forms of human mobility, and as Collins-Kreiner (2010) notes, it has evolved beyond purely religious purposes and now includes cultural, educational, and experiential dimensions.

Domestic tourism has received growing scholarly attention, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Zenker and Kock (2020) highlight that the pandemic significantly shifted travel behavior, encouraging people to explore destinations within their own countries. However, research on domestic pilgrimage tourism remains limited, with most studies focusing on international movements to well-known destinations such as Mecca, Jerusalem, or the Camino de Santiago.

In recent years, attracting younger generations to pilgrimage destinations has become an increasing challenge. Young people obtain travel information primarily through digital channels and social media (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), and user-generated content carries greater influence than traditional advertising among younger audiences (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Kim and Fesenmaier (2017) further emphasize that the visual and narrative quality of digital content plays a decisive role in shaping travel intentions among digitally active generations.

Digital storytelling — the use of narrative techniques combined with multimedia content — has gained attention as a tool for promoting cultural and heritage destinations (Lundby, 2008). Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) argue that digital narratives play a central role in shaping tourist experiences and destination perceptions, while Pera (2017) adds that storytelling creates emotional bonds between tourists and destinations. More recent studies confirm that short-form video platforms such as TikTok and Instagram significantly influence travel planning among younger age groups (Gretzel, 2018; Li et al., 2023). However, the application of digital storytelling to pilgrimage tourism remains largely unexplored, especially in Central Asian contexts (Bassano et al., 2019).

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This study aims to address this gap by investigating the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent are young domestic tourists aware of pilgrimage destinations in the Bukhara region, and how are these sites represented in the digital space?

RQ2: Which digital storytelling formats most effectively generate emotional engagement and travel intention among young audiences?

RQ3: What structural barriers prevent the systematic use of digital storytelling in pilgrimage tourism promotion?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how digital storytelling influences young domestic tourists' perceptions and travel intentions toward pilgrimage destinations in the Bukhara region. A qualitative approach was selected as appropriate for understanding the subjective meanings and experiences underlying participants' engagement with digital content about sacred heritage sites (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

A total of 18 participants were selected through purposive sampling and divided into three groups: young domestic tourists aged 18–35 who had visited or shown interest in pilgrimage sites (n=10), social media content creators producing travel-related digital content (n=4), and local tourism practitioners working in the Bukhara region (n=4). Table 1 presents the participant profile.

Table 1. *Participant Profile*

Group	Code	Gender	Age range	N	Key characteristics
Young tourists	YT1–YT10	5F / 5M	19–33	10	University students, young professionals from Bukhara, Tashkent, Samarkand, Navoi
Content creators	CC1–CC4	2F / 2M	24–30	4	Travel bloggers, videographers, social media managers
Tourism practitioners	TP1–TP4	2F / 2M	35–45	4	Tourism officials, hotel managers, tour operators, museum curators

Source: *Fieldwork data, March–May 2024.*

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between March and May 2024. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was conducted face-to-face or online via Telegram video calls. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide covered: travel habits and information sources, familiarity with pilgrimage destinations, experience with digital content about sacred heritage, preferred digital formats, and the perceived influence of digital narratives on travel motivation. The guide was piloted with two participants and adjusted for clarity.

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to look at the data. The process included reading the data over and over again to get to know it, coming up with initial codes, putting codes into larger groups, checking themes for coherence, and defining and naming final themes. Trustworthiness was augmented via the triangulation of three participant groups, meticulous audit trail documentation, and the substantiation of all themes in participant quotations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Everyone who took part gave their informed consent, and alphanumeric coding kept their identities secret.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed five interconnected themes. The findings are presented below with illustrative quotes.

Theme 1: The Awareness Paradox (RQ1)

All ten young participants recognized pilgrimage tourism as an important part of Uzbek culture, yet their actual knowledge of specific destinations was superficial. Seven out of ten could name only the Bahauddin Naqshband complex and Chor-Bakr necropolis, while sites such as Khoja Zayniddin mosque and Sayfiddin Bokharzi mausoleum were mentioned by only two respondents:

> *"I know pilgrimage sites are important for our culture, but honestly, I can't name more than two or three in Bukhara. I've never seen them on Instagram or TikTok, so they just don't exist in my world" (YT3).*

Participants pointed to the absence of these destinations from their digital information space as the main reason. Tourism practitioners confirmed that most sites have no social media presence, with promotional materials designed for older, religiously motivated visitors (TP1).

Theme 2: The Power of Short-Form Visual Narrative (RQ2)

Nine out of ten young tourists identified TikTok and Instagram Reels as their primary platforms for discovering new travel destinations. CC1 reported that a 45-second video about a Bukhara heritage site accumulated over 50,000 views, while a detailed seven-minute video on the same topic received fewer than 3,000. However, effectiveness depended on narrative structure rather than format alone:

> *"The best videos are not just showing a building. They show a person — a pilgrim doing their morning prayer, a grandmother telling a story about why she comes every year. That's what makes me want to go there myself" (YT6).*

Theme 3: Authenticity Over Production Quality (RQ2)

Eight out of ten young tourists stated that overly commercial or heavily edited content reduces their trust. The most compelling content was described as natural, filmed in real settings, and featuring genuine voices:

> *"When I see a perfectly edited video with a voiceover that sounds like an advertisement, I scroll past it. But when someone just films on their phone and talks naturally about a place, I actually listen" (YT2).*

CC2 noted that a smartphone video of an elderly caretaker sharing a personal memory at Chor-Bakr received ten times more engagement than professionally produced content.

Theme 4: From Viewing to Visiting (RQ2)

Five out of ten young participants reported having visited a destination specifically because of social media content, while three others saved pilgrimage-related content for future travel planning:

> *"I saw a Reel about Bolo-Khauz mosque that I didn't even know existed. The creator showed it at sunset with beautiful light, and a local person was explaining its history. I went there the next time I visited Bukhara specifically because of that video" (YT5).*

TP2 confirmed a visible increase in young visitors to Chor-Bakr after a popular Tashkent-based blogger posted a series of stories from the site.

Theme 5: Structural Barriers (RQ3)

Despite the demonstrated potential, several obstacles hinder effective implementation: the absence of a coordinated digital promotion strategy at the regional level; weak collaboration between tourism bodies and content creators; limited internet infrastructure at remote sacred sites; the sensitive task of presenting spiritual content in a modern format; and the lack of training for local specialists in digital content creation.

> *"Everyone agrees that we need to be on social media, but nobody knows who should do it, how to do it, or who will pay for it. There is no strategy" (TP3).*

DISCUSSION

The results of this research provide significant insights that enhance the current body of literature on digital storytelling and the promotion of heritage tourism. This part puts the empirical results in a bigger theoretical context, showing how they support and add to previous research.

The awareness paradox delineated in Theme 1 offers direct empirical validation for Xiang and Gretzel's (2010) assertion that destinations lacking a presence in digital realms are essentially imperceptible to younger demographics. Nonetheless, our findings broaden this observation to a previously unstudied context: domestic pilgrimage tourism in Central Asia. The young people who took part in the pilgrimage knew it was important to their culture, but only knew two or three sites. This shows that the problem is not cultural indifference, but a lack of digital infrastructure. This distinction is significant because it indicates that the "awareness gap" can be mitigated through targeted digital interventions rather than necessitating fundamental transformations in cultural attitudes. Li et al. (2023) found that digital visibility is now a must-have for younger people who want to visit a certain place. This finding fits with that general trend.

The prevalence of short-form video content noted in Theme 2 corresponds with recent research by Li et al. (2023) on TikTok's increasing impact on travel-related decision-making among young adults. However, our study adds an important layer of detail by showing that format alone is not enough; the way the story is told in the short-form format is just as important. The focus that participants had on "complete micro-stories," which are stories with a beginning, an emotional core, and a resolution in 30 to 60 seconds, builds on Pera's (2017) work on destination storytelling. Pera concentrated on the transformation of destinations into emotionally significant locales through storytelling. Our research indicates that emotional narrative compression is a unique skill particularly pertinent to the promotion of digital heritage. This is a useful contribution: people who make content about sacred heritage sites need to be able to tell stories and also be able to condense complicated spiritual and historical meaning into very short narrative arcs.

The importance of authenticity over production quality, as shown in Theme 3, supports and builds on Gretzel's (2018) findings about authenticity as a key value in digital tourism communication. Our findings indicate that this preference is especially pronounced in the realm of sacred heritage, where participants regarded polished commercial content not only as less engaging but also as actively disrespectful or misleading. This indicates that the authenticity expectations recorded in secular tourism contexts (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014) are heightened in pilgrimage environments, where the perceived spiritual authenticity of content directly influences its credibility. This finding has positive implications from a practical standpoint:

effective digital storytelling for pilgrimage destinations does not necessitate significant financial investment, but rather a considerate and empathetic approach to documenting authentic human experiences at sacred sites.

The evidence of behavioral impact discussed in Theme 4 corroborates Kim and Fesenmaier's (2017) model that associates digital content quality with actual travel behavior. The fact that half of the young participants went to a place just because of what they saw on social media shows that there is a strong link between digital engagement and physical visitation. Moreover, the corroborative evidence from tourism professionals—who noted significant increases in young visitors subsequent to extensive social media coverage—enhances the credibility of self-reported behavioral data. This triangulation of perspectives yields more substantial evidence than any single source, demonstrating that digital storytelling serves not only as an awareness tool but also as a direct catalyst for travel decision-making among young domestic tourists.

Lastly, the structural barriers found in Theme 5 show that the difference between the potential of digital storytelling and its actual use is not due to individual factors, but rather to the system as a whole. In contrast to earlier research that concentrated mainly on content creation strategies and narrative techniques (Bassano et al., 2019; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009), our results underscore the institutional, infrastructural, and cultural aspects of the implementation gap. The lack of coordinated strategies, the difficulty of accessing the internet in remote areas, and the conflict between modern digital formats and sacred sensitivity are all problems that individual content creators can't solve on their own. They need coordinated policy responses. The tension between authenticity and sacred sensitivity is a previously unrecorded challenge unique to digital storytelling in pilgrimage contexts, distinguishing this field from secular heritage tourism promotion.

The findings indicate that current destination marketing frameworks, originally designed for secular and international tourism, necessitate modification to address the spiritual sensitivity, increased authenticity expectations, and digital infrastructure challenges inherent in pilgrimage tourism within developing countries. The research enhances the literature by applying the notion of "digital destination visibility" (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) to pilgrimage tourism and by recognizing authenticity-driven narrative compression as a unique method for captivating younger audiences with sacred heritage.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the potential of digital storytelling as a strategy for attracting young domestic tourists to pilgrimage destinations in the Bukhara region. The findings confirm that a significant gap exists between the cultural richness of sacred heritage sites and their digital visibility. Short-form video content with authentic personal narratives emerged as the most effective format for generating emotional connection and travel intention among younger audiences, while structural barriers at the institutional level hinder systematic implementation.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed: (1) regional tourism authorities should develop a coordinated digital content strategy targeting young audiences and covering lesser-known pilgrimage sites; (2) formal partnerships between tourism bodies and local content creators should be established; (3) investment in internet infrastructure at remote pilgrimage sites is necessary; (4) training programs on digital storytelling for local tourism specialists should be introduced; and (5) guidelines for filming at sacred sites should be developed in consultation with religious leaders and content creators.

The study has several limitations. The qualitative design with 18 participants provides depth but limits broader generalization. The focus on Bukhara alone may not be directly

transferable to other regions, and the study relied on self-reported data regarding the influence of digital content on travel behavior. Future research could expand the scope through quantitative methods, comparative analysis across different pilgrimage regions in Central Asia, and longitudinal studies tracking how digital content exposure influences actual visitation patterns over time.

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MODERN TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOMESTIC TOURISM PROCESSES ON THE EXAMPLE OF GEORGIA

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ABSTRACT: *Tourism can bring multifaceted benefits to developing countries. This is very important for a country such as Georgia. Georgia indeed has great potential for tourism development. It is distinguished by its natural beauty, historical buildings and structures, a diverse landscape, and hospitable people. There are also numerous cultural monuments, which are very important for the development of cultural tourism. In Georgia, international tourism is more developed and receives special attention. However, the development of domestic tourism is no less important for the country. As is known, domestic tourism is one of the means of alleviating crisis, but its share in Georgia is low.*

The paper aims to conduct a statistical study of domestic tourism processes in Georgia, to identify its development trends and problems at the present stage.

The statistical analysis of domestic tourism in Georgia reveals that, during 2015–2024, domestic tourism has exhibited an upward trend. In 2024, visits carrieed out by domestic visitors increased by 2.6% compared to 2023. The largest share of visitors falls within the 31–50 age group (36.5%). Also, the largest share of visits (38.8%) was in Tbilisi, and the majority of them (51.4%) were for visiting friends and relatives; the average length of stay of domestic visitors was 5.6 nights. Despite the slow pace of domestic tourism development, further increasing and encouraging domestic tourism in the country requires once again developing and implementing effective, targeted state policy.

KEYWORDS: domestic tourism, tourism, visitors, state policy, statistical analysis, growth trend.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the leading sectors of the world economy, driven by high growth rates and economic importance. As is known, tourism can bring multifaceted benefits to developing countries. According to the data of the Marketing Service of the World Tourism Organization, the accompanying processes of tourism development include: employment; combating poverty; increase in state revenues; development of infrastructure; support of local culture and handicrafts; promotion of environmental protection; domestic tourism; promotion of the establishment of international mutual understanding. This is very important for a country such as Georgia. Georgia indeed has this potential, distinguished by its beautiful nature, historical buildings and constructions, diverse landscape, and hospitable people. There are numerous cultural monuments in Georgia, which are very important for the development of cultural tourism. It is also important that the share of tourism in Georgia's gross domestic product constitutes 10%, and 9% of employment, which represents significant income for the country.

In Georgia, international tourism is more developed and receives special attention, as it is an important source of foreign currency inflow and reduces the depreciation of the national currency. However, the development of domestic tourism is no less important for the country (N. Abesadze & et al., 2018). In developing countries, domestic tourism is developing rapidly. It should also be taken into account that, unlike international tourists, domestic tourists are familiar with the culture, climate, and spoken language of the host destination. Due to the proximity of the location, in the case of domestic tourism, mainly land transport is used, which reduces time and visit expenses. Unlike international tourism, domestic tourism is less characterized by seasonality and contributes to the redistribution of income between urban and rural settlements. Also, domestic tourism is less sensitive to economic shocks and crises

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occurring in the world (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2020).

As already mentioned, domestic tourism is one of the means of alleviating crisis, but its share in Georgia is low. Compared to other countries, the scale of domestic tourism in Georgia is quite limited, as a large part of the local population rents private houses.

RESULTS

The analysis of the data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia showed that in 2024, domestic visitors carried out a total of 19.7 million visits, which represents a 2.6% increase compared to 2023 (19.2 million), while compared to 2020, it amounts to 58% (Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2024). The highest number of visits is traditionally recorded in the third quarter of the year. During 2015–2024, the number of visits is characterized by an increasing trend (see Figure 1).

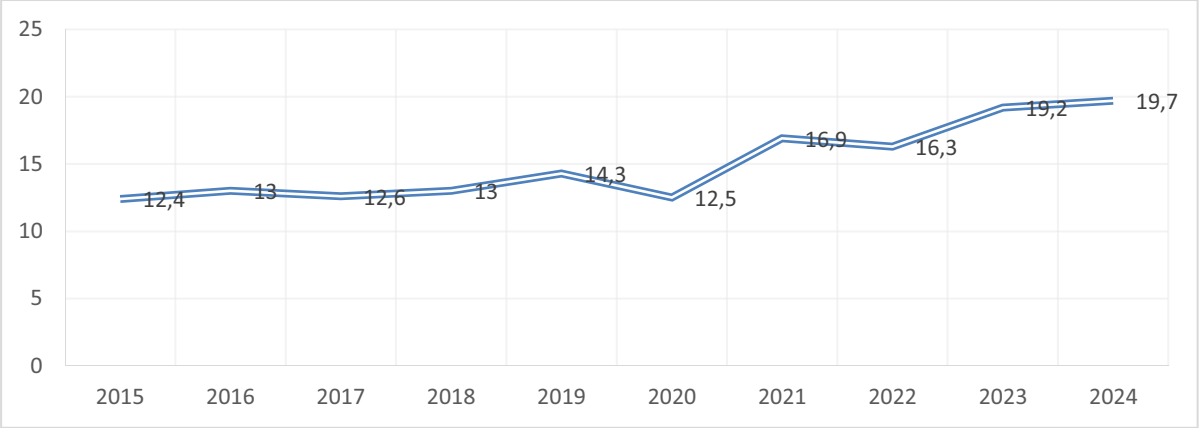

Figure 1. Number of Visits in Georgia in 2015–2024 (million)

During 2015–2024, the largest share of domestic visitors falls within the 31–50 age group (36.5%), with a particularly higher proportion of this group observed in the post-pandemic period. A significant share is also held by the 51–70 age group (33.6%). However, the indicator for the 51–70 age group was especially high in 2023 (32.2%) and increased further in 2024 (33.6%). This is followed by the 15–30 age group (20.8%) and the 71+ age group (9.2%). The distribution of visitors by gender is almost equal: 50.1% of visitors were women and 49.9% were men (Georgian National Tourism Administration, 2024).

It is interesting which region of Georgia is most frequently visited by domestic visitors. In 2024, according to the data of the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the largest share of visits (38.8%) was carried out in Tbilisi, followed by Imereti (14.8%), Kvemo Kartli (9.2%), and Adjara (8.4%). Among the remaining regions, the highest number of visits was recorded in Shida Kartli (6.2%), Kakheti (5.7%), Mtskheta-Mtianeti (5%), Samtskhe-Javakheti (4%), and Guria (2.4%). Such interest in visiting these regions has been maintained from 2015 to the present.

In 2024, the majority of domestic visits in Georgia (51.4%) were carried out for visiting friends and relatives. 15.7% of visits were for shopping, and 11.4% for leisure, entertainment, and recreation. Treatment and wellness accounted for 8.3%, and professional and economic activity for 2% (National Statistics Office of Georgia, n.d.). During 2015–2024, all these indicators are characterized by an increasing trend. However, it should also be noted that the COVID pandemic did not pass without impact here either; in 2020–2021, the indicators for all categories decreased significantly (see Table 1).

Table No. 1 Purpose of Visits in Georgia in 2015–2024 (%)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Leisure, Entertainment, Recreation	7.60%	9%	10%	9.10%	10%	8%	8.10%	10%	11%	11.40%
Visiting Friends and Relatives	54,5%	52,5%	50,4%	51.80%	51%	46%	47%	50,7%	47,2%	51,4%
Medical Treatment and Wellness	10,3%	11,1%	11,2%	10,5%	8,8%	8,6%	8,9%	8,9%	8,5%	8,3%
Shopping	11,4%	12,3%	13,4%	13,3 %	12,3%	14,3%	13,2%	11,7%	8,5%	15,7%
Professional and Economic Activities	6%	4,7%	4,4%	4.40%	4,7%	3,9%	3,5%	3,2%	2,6%	2%

In 2024, the total number of nights spent by domestic visitors exceeded 28 million, with the average length of stay amounting to 5.6 nights. During 2015–2024, the highest average number of nights was recorded in 2021 (6.2 nights), which represents an 82% increase compared to 2015, followed by a 10% decrease in 2024.

By accommodation type, the majority of domestic visitors (59.1%) stayed at the home of friends or relatives, 24.8% stayed in their own homes, and 6.6% preferred a guesthouse or hotel. A notable share also stayed in rented rooms or houses (3.7%) and hotels (3.3%) (see Figure 2).

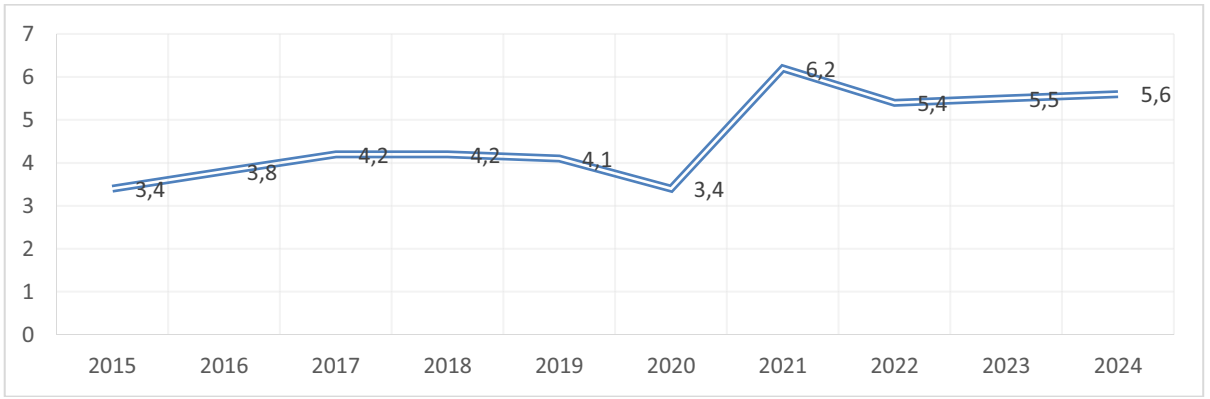

Figure No. 2. Average Number of Nights in Georgia in 2015–2024

In 2024, the total expenditures of domestic visitors exceeded 3.6 billion GEL, with the average expenditure per visit amounting to 201.3 GEL. From 2015 to 2020, total expenditures increased only slightly. However, since 2021, a sharp increase in expenditures has been recorded. The 2024 figure represents a 9.1% increase compared to the previous year, a 100% increase compared to 2020, and a 140% increase compared to 2015.

The largest shares of expenditures were allocated to shopping (35.7%), food and beverages (24.8%), and transport (20.1%). Domestic visitors spent 5.2% on accommodation, 1.1% on recreation, cultural, and sports activities, and 13% on other expenses (see Figure 3).

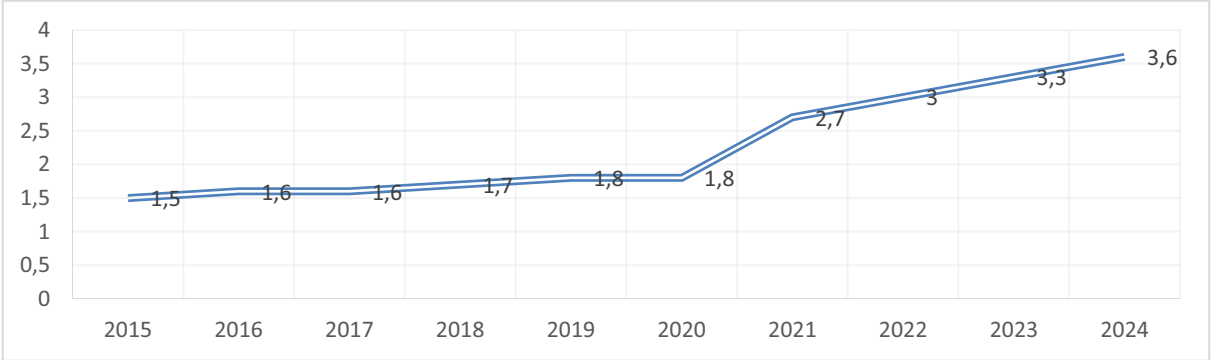

Figure No. 3. Expenditures in Georgia in 2015–2024 (billion GEL)

The data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia clearly show that the development of domestic tourism is characterized by an increasing trend across all indicators. However, further development and a series of state-led measures are needed to enhance domestic tourism in Georgia.

It is also noteworthy that, to promote domestic tourism in 2021, the Georgian National Tourism Administration organized press tours across the country to popularize touristically interesting but lesser-known locations. A total of 23 press, info, and gastro tours were held, involving Georgian journalists, bloggers, photographers, and videographers. Through the info-tour project, the tourism administration provided both domestic and incoming tourism companies with the opportunity to learn about lesser-known sites, tourist products, routes, and attractions in various regions of Georgia, which these companies would later include in future tours offered to both Georgian and foreign travelers (Interpressnews, 2021).

In parallel with info-tours, the tourism administration continued culinary tours. The goal of the project was to promote gastro-tourism, highlight the culinary potential of different regions, increase awareness of unique local cuisines, and stimulate domestic tourism. This contributes to the economic benefits of domestic tourism and improves the balance of payments, as local spending reduces the outflow of foreign currency.

The tourism administration continues to prioritize domestic tourism by organizing projects that allow travelers to explore lesser-known regions, develop new tourism packages based on the routes, and implement over 40 press and info tours, gastro-tours, festivals, and events in 2025 (Kvira.ge, 2022). In 2025, the administration launched a new festival, "Gemo Fest," the first culinary festival in Ambrolauri, Racha. The gastronomic festival will gradually take place across Georgia. To promote winter resorts, a ski competition was held for the first time. For the promotion of Georgian wine and wine tourism, the administration co-organized the "Gurjaani International Wine Festival" and "Jazz & Wine Kakheti" in Kakheti. Alongside gastro- and wine tourism, tea tourism remains a priority for the tourism administration (N. Abesadze & N. Dokhturishvili, 2023).

Additionally, to support domestic tourism, the National Statistics Office of Georgia reported that in 2024, permits were issued for the construction of 249 hotels in Georgia, covering a total area of 550,716 sq.m. Among these, 71 permits were in Tbilisi, 80 in Adjara, 25 in Kakheti, 24 in Guria, 16 in Samtskhe-Javakheti, 15 in Imereti, 6 in Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, 4 each in Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti, 4 in Shida Kartli, and 2 each in Kvemo Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti.

Another significant measure was the development of the "Tourism Strategy of Georgia 2025" by the Government of Georgia (Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, 2025), which aims to create a roadmap for the sustainable development of tourism,

increasing revenue, and enhancing the sector's significance. The project included:

1) Improvement of roads and related infrastructure leading to the country's most impressive tourist destinations;
2) Improvement and modernization of tourism-related infrastructure;
3) Preservation of cultural heritage monuments and other culturally significant assets, and improvement of their accessibility, existing services, and interpretive infrastructure;
4) Increasing awareness of the country's tourism potential in both international and domestic markets;
5) Improving the education system in the tourism sector and increasing the accessibility of educational programs nationwide;
6) Offering new tourism products and diversifying existing ones;
7) Enhancing data collection and analysis, market research, and marketing capabilities.

The main motivations for domestic tourism are relaxation, social interactions, and new experiences. Price perception, service quality, and infrastructure are key factors influencing visitor satisfaction. Social media often creates a gap between expectations and reality. Expectations also vary by age: younger groups prioritize emotional experiences, while older groups value comfort. Positive experiences increase the likelihood of repeat visits.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the study show that domestic tourism in Georgia during 2015–2024 has been characterized by a growing trend. In 2024, the number of visits by domestic visitors increased by 2.6% compared to 2023. The largest share of visitors belonged to the 31–50 age group (36.5%). The majority of visits (38.8%) were made to Tbilisi, and most visits (51.4%) were for visiting friends and relatives. The average length of stay for domestic visitors was 5.6 nights.

To promote domestic tourism, in 2021 the Georgian National Tourism Administration organized press tours across the country to popularize touristically interesting but lesser-known locations. Through the info-tour project, the tourism administration enabled both domestic and incoming tourism companies to learn about lesser-known sites, tourist products, routes, and attractions in different regions of Georgia, which could later be included in future tours offered to both Georgian and foreign travelers.

In parallel with info-tours, the tourism administration continued culinary tours. The aim of the project was to promote gastro-tourism, showcase the culinary potential of different regions, increase awareness of unique local cuisine, and stimulate domestic tourism, thereby supporting the overall development of the sector.

In 2025, the tourism administration launched the new festival "Gemo Fest" for the first time, a culinary festival held in Ambrolauri, Racha. To promote winter resorts, a ski competition was organized for the first time. For the promotion of Georgian wine and wine tourism, the administration co-organized the "Gurjaani International Wine Festival" and "Jazz & Wine Kakheti" in Kakheti. Alongside gastro- and wine tourism, tea tourism remains a priority. It is also noteworthy that, to support domestic tourism, the National Statistics Office of Georgia reported that in 2024, permits were issued for the construction of 249 hotels across Georgia.

Another significant measure was the development of the "Tourism Strategy of Georgia 2025" by the Government of Georgia, which aims to create a roadmap for the sustainable development of tourism, increasing revenue, and enhancing the sector's significance.

However, it should be noted that current challenges faced by tourism sector representatives cannot be fully resolved solely by focusing on domestic tourism. Domestic tourism alone cannot significantly compensate for losses in international tourism. Its

development represents a long-term future prospect that requires accurate statistical data, engagement from tourism sector stakeholders, close communication between the government and the sector, and thorough analysis of key processes.

To stimulate domestic tourism, several measures are necessary. Based on the experience of other countries, these may include:

- Organizing active educational and exploratory tours for schools and higher education institutions across different regions of Georgia to stimulate future domestic tourism;
- Holding government meetings, conferences, and similar events in different regions to support domestic tourism;
- Offering domestic tourism packages to employees in public sector offices and large companies;
- Organizing regional discount weeks and related promotional events.

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DOMESTIC TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD IN GEORGIA: STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Nino Abesadze[1], Otar Abesadze[2]

***ABSTRACT**: After the global Covid-19 pandemic, Georgia quickly implemented the tourism rehabilitation process and today the development of tourism in the country is in an upward phase, with a trend of increasing statistical indicators in both international and domestic tourism. Domestic tourism has recovered at a faster pace. The purpose of the study is to identify and analyze statistical trends in domestic tourism in Georgia.*

Methodology. In the research process, general (analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, etc.), as well as specific (observation, gathering-grouping, analysis: average values, relative indicators, dynamic series, etc.)

Results. Domestic tourism in the country has recovered rapidly after the pandemic; Domestic tourism in the country has recovered rapidly after the pandemic; The growth rates of domestic visits during the study period were characterized by an increasing trend in almost all years; The younger population is particularly active among visitors; Analysis of regional data showed that the most active tourist regions are Tbilisi, Imereti and Adjara, while the fewest domestic visits were made to Samegrelo, Upper Svaneti and Shida Kartli; Analysis of visits by gender showed that women were more active; Average tourist spending increased by an average of 5.2%. Georgian residents spend an average of 5.6 nights traveling within their country. Visitors spend the most on food and shopping.

According to the results of our research, some of the respondents intend to make domestic tourist visits in the future; The most popular destinations are Tbilisi, Svaneti, and Kakheti regions; Visitors plan short-term trips; Respondents find domestic travel with colleagues and friends comfortable; Respondents intend to spend up to 1000-1500 GEL on their trip.

***KEYWORDS**: domestic tourism, costs, trend, growth rate, analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry in Georgia encompasses a wide range of consumer services, ranging from core and supplementary services for tourists, to domestic and international transportation, food and beverage services, security provision, environmental protection, sanitation, insurance organisation, and many others. (Khelashvili & Sharia, M, 2025) Annually, Georgia has been observing steady growth in the influx of international tourists, a trend that was evident until 2019, according to data from Our World in Data (2023). This growth has spanned the past two decades, signifying the progression of the tourism sector. Nevertheless, while the industry advances, certain aspects warrant attention to enhance outcomes. (Okroshidze, Meyer, D.F, & Khelashvili, 2024).

To increase tourist flows, it is important to further raise the country's profile and increase its competitiveness.

Increasing the competitiveness of active tourist locations is important for the development of tourism, as it is one of the indicators of attractiveness and growth of tourist flows. According to the OECD Tourism Competitiveness Indicators report, destination competitiveness is the ability of a destination to enhance its appeal to residents and non-residents by attaining high levels of quality, innovation, and attractiveness of tourism services. This involves expanding market share in local and global markets while ensuring efficient and sustainable use of resources that support tourism A destination is deemed competitive if it is appealing from a territorial standpoint, easily accessible (meaning territorial accessibility), functions efficiently, and positively impacts economic development.

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Although the growth rates of international tourism are much higher than those of domestic tourism, domestic tourism is developing in Georgia. This is evidenced by monthly data and calculations based on them.

Local tourism in the Soviet Union was viewed as part of sports and healthcare, aiming to involve young people in mountaineering, hiking, cycling, and other outdoor activities (Eristavi, 1954) The first resort development began around the turn of the century with "balneoclimatic" resorts. International tourism was utilized as propaganda by organized tourism to show the achievements of the Soviet peoples to incoming visitors. (Khokhobaia & Gugushvili, T, 2021)

Historically, the development of domestic tourism has been associated with the development of sports and healthcare. Although the Covid-19 pandemic has dealt a great blow and shocked tourism, its rehabilitation process has proceeded quickly, and immediately after the pandemic ended, an active revival of tourism was observed, especially in domestic tourism. Tourism, which was a priority and important direction of the country's economy, turned out to be limited. The rehabilitation of international tourism turned out to be more difficult, requiring consideration of many conditions and factors. It was relatively easy for Georgia to revive and develop domestic tourism. These processes took place quickly and much more effectively. The development of tourism was further facilitated by the deepening of globalization and global events taking place in the world.

Today, the globalization has become a crucial issue in the everyday political, economic and social and cultural life. (Abesadze, Kinkladze, R, Paresashvili, N, Chitaladze, K, & Meishvili, S, 2020)

In the contemporary environment, characterised by rapid change, individuals are compelled to optimise the utilisation of their time and resources. (Katsitadze, Kharadze, N, & Pirtskhalaishvili, D, 2025) This is of particular importance in terms of planning a trip wisely and achieving the expected effects from it.

Development of tourism implies strong resorts, more workforce, reduction of unemployment, stability of currency, possibilities of economic growth, infrastructural development, investment and what is the most important, it - it raises the country's awareness abroad. (Paresashvili & Chitaladze, K, 2019)

From the strategic point of view, it is very important for Georgia to enhance the world trade - economic, financial and other kinds of relations, especially when it is in the foreign interests of the country to share the ad-vanced European values and experiences and join the European Union. (Abesadze & Abesadze, O, Anticipated trends of Georgia's integration with the European Union., 2016) In order to form the right economic policy of the country it is necessary to conduct a theoretical and practical research in the area of the integration of Georgia into the world economic area, to study the foreign economic contacts quantitatively, to reveal the main tendencies of the development, to calculate their forecasting indexes, to estimate the results correctly and to work out appropriate political-economic proposals and preventive measures. (Abesadze N., 2015)

Today, against the backdrop of the pandemic, the tourism rehabilitation process is underway in Georgia. After recovering from two years of economic uncertainty and shock, the tourism development in Georgia is slowly returning to the pre-pandemic situation. There is a growing trend in the movement of tourist flows, higher activity from companies operating in the domestic tourist market, and advertising campaigns in social networks offering diverse tourist packages and perfect service offerings. Of course, there are still risks associated with the spread of the virus, so it will be necessary to follow some regulations to certain extent. Therefore, the rehabilitation process will not be easy, either for domestic or for international

tourism. In this regard, the levers for the development of domestic tourism are in the hands of the population itself, because the scale of the rehabilitation of domestic tourism depends a lot on their cautious behavior. Although, according to the data available today, international tourism has the highest rate of development in the overall tourism of Georgia, still the domestic tourism potential of the country is growing, and it needs to be used effectively. Moreover, the growth rates of the number of domestic tourist visits made before the pandemic and the number of domestic visitors in the recent period create positive expectations for tourism. One main promoting factor can be developing tourism destination management, including understanding importance of stakeholders and their cooperation. So it is important to estimate events in a tourism field, detect trends and determine statistical rules. (Abesadze N., 2019) his, surely, means the perfection of the activity of the National Statistics Office and its maximum harmonization to international standards. (Quliyev, Abesadze, Abesadze, & Amanova. L, 2019)

Today, the globalization has become a crucial issue in the everyday political, economic, social and cultural life. From the strategic point of view, it is very important for Georgia to enhance the world trade - economic, financial and other kinds of relations, especially when it is in the foreign interests of the country to share the advanced European values and experiences and join the European Union. (Quliyev, Abesadze, N, Abesadze, O, & Amanova, L, 2019)

Georgia is a country very rich in natural beauty, with an extensive history and culture. Georgia has also many natural heritage products, such as the mountain resorts such as Borjomi, Abastumani, Tskaltubo, Sairme and so on. (Abesadze, Amanova, L, & Abesadze, O, Trends in the growth of tourist flows from Azerbaijan to Georgia, 2020) People often visit these places not only for the unique nature, but for the exceptional air and water quality, which some believe can cure different deceases. Another popular destination is the sea resort Ureki with its course dark sands with magnetic properties which are also said to treat health problems. The country also has winter resorts such as Gudauri and Bakuriani, with abundant annual snowfalls, which are popular destination or tourists and skiers, as well as natural gorges and delightful waterfalls, attracting local and international trekkers and nature-lovers. (Abesadze, Kinkladze, & Paresashvili, Increasing Trends of Tourist Flows from the European Countries to Georgia, 2019)

The purpose of the study is to identify and analyze statistical trends in domestic tourism in Georgia.

METHODOLOGY

In the research process, general (analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, etc.), as well as specific (observation, gathering-grouping, analysis: average values, relative indicators, dynamic series, selective observation, etc.)

RESULTS

Data analysis revealed that domestic tourism is gaining strength in the country, especially among the younger population. The number of people willing to travel domestically has increased. (Quliyev, Abesadze, Abesadze, & Amanova. L, 2019)

The growth rates of domestic visits during the study period were characterized by an increasing trend in almost all years, after the pandemic, only in 2022 and 2025 were there decreases compared to the previous year. On average, domestic tourist visits in 2015-2024 increased by 5,2% each year for 10 years, the average annual growth rate was 105.2% (See Figure 1) The 2025 figure combines data from the first three quarters. If we compare it with the previous year's quarterly data, the full 2025 figure will probably be equal to the previous year's figure.

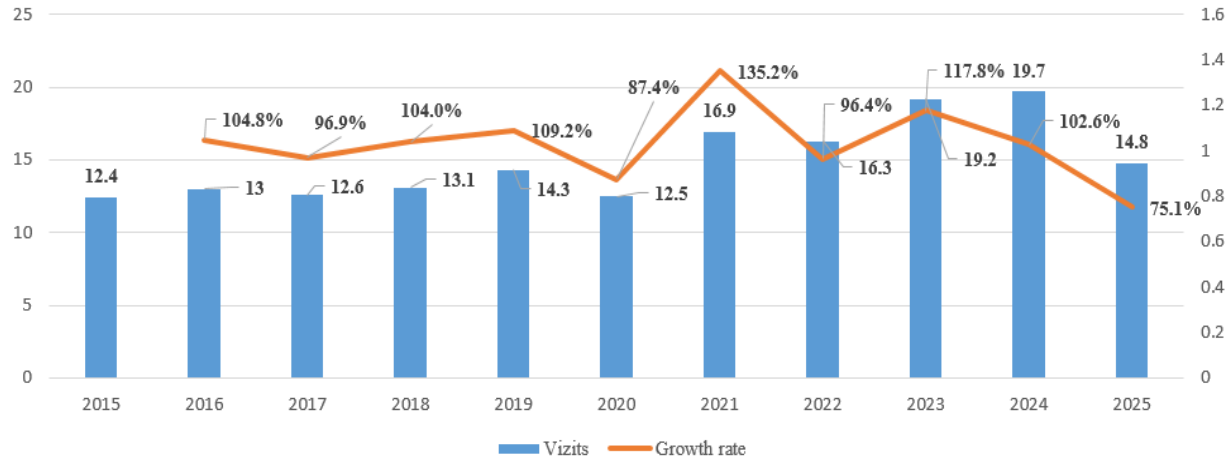

Figure 1. Dynamics of the number of domestic tourist visits (million) and growth rates (%)
Source: https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators

Since visits are classified into tourist and excursion visits, let's analyze the dynamics of each type of visit. The highest increase in tourist, or overnight, visits was recorded in 2021 (379%). This is not surprising, as after the lifting of restrictions following the COVID-19 pandemic, large tourist flows for leisure and recreation were recorded from Georgian residents.

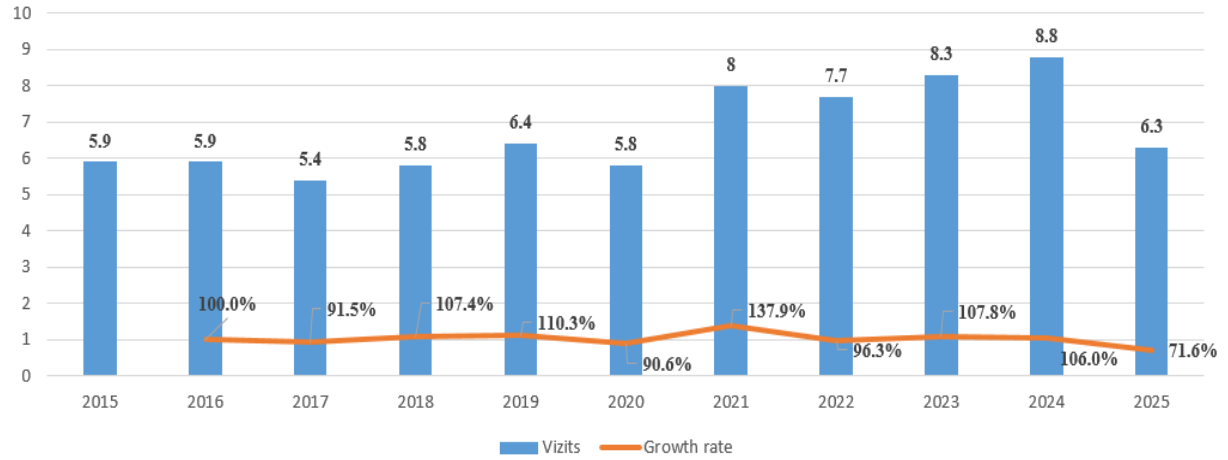

Figure 2. Dynamics of the number of tourist visits (million) and their growth rates (%)
Source: https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators

In the following years, the number of tourist visits increased significantly compared to the pre-pandemic year of 2019. However, growth rates were not observed in all years compared to the previous year, although this does not mean that the demand for tourist visits by Georgian residents has decreased during the study period. In 2022, the decline rate was 3.7%.

As can be seen from the diagram, there are expectations of a decrease in 2025, but we note once again that 2025 covers only the first three quarters. As for excursion visits, i.e., trips of residents to various locations for up to 24 hours, different trends were identified here. In this case, 2021 is also distinguished by a significant increase (32.8%), but over the past 2 years, there has been a total decrease, ranging between 0.9% and 22.2%. In 2022, the decrease rate was 3.4%, while in 2023, an increase of 26.7% was recorded. On average, the average annual growth rate of excursion visits in 2015-2024 % was 104.5%, which means that excursion visits increased by 4.5% each year.

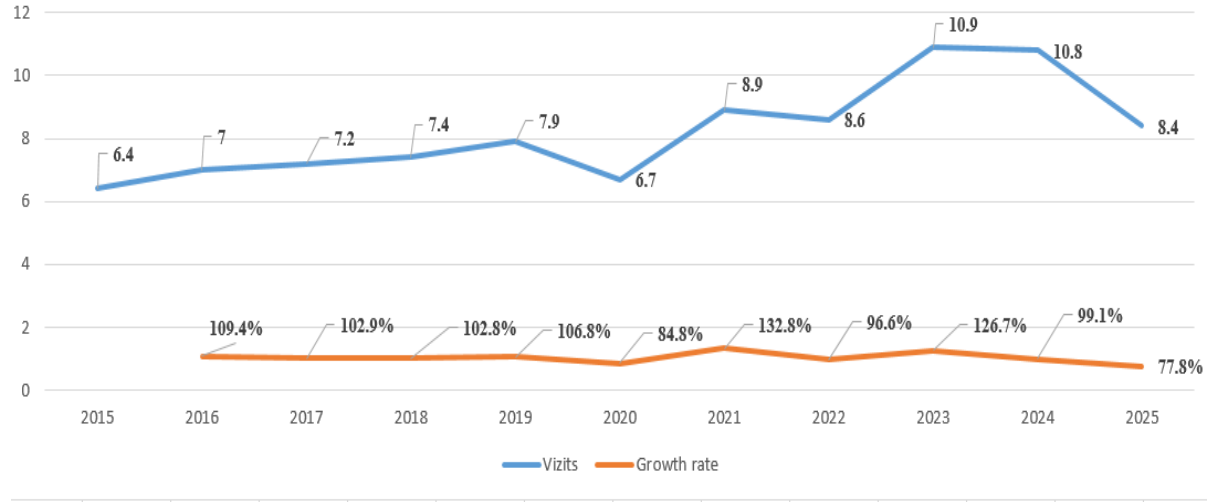

Figure 3. Dynamics of the number of excursion visits (million) and their growth rates (%)
Source: https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators

Analysis of age data showed that the most active tourist population in Georgia is the population over the age of 30. The number of visits made by them is characterized by equal trends in dynamics and no significant changes have been identified in Georgia. (See Figure 4)

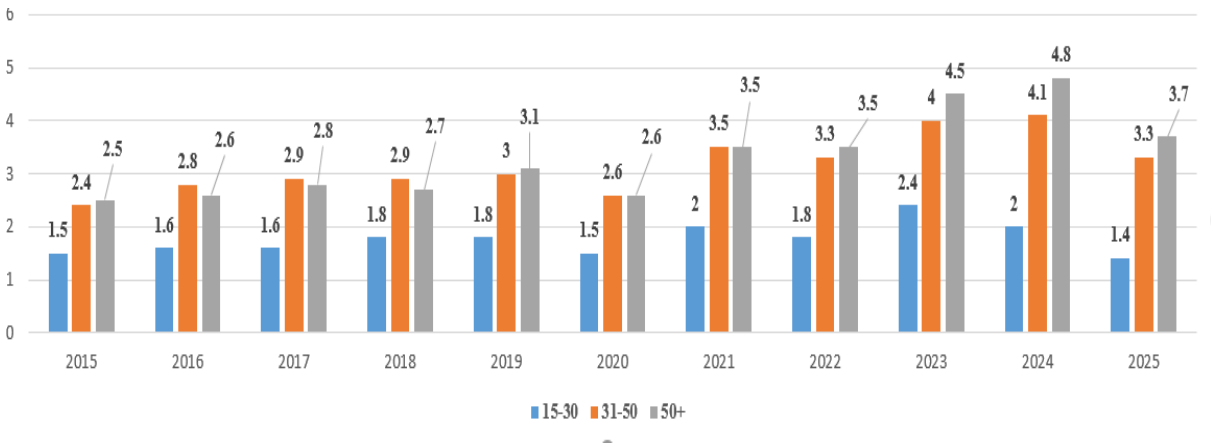

Figure 4. Distribution of domestic tourists by age group.
Source: https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators

As it turned out, women are more active and travel-loving in Georgia. Men are less active than women in tourist visits. However, there is a clear advantage of women in Georgia in excursion visits.

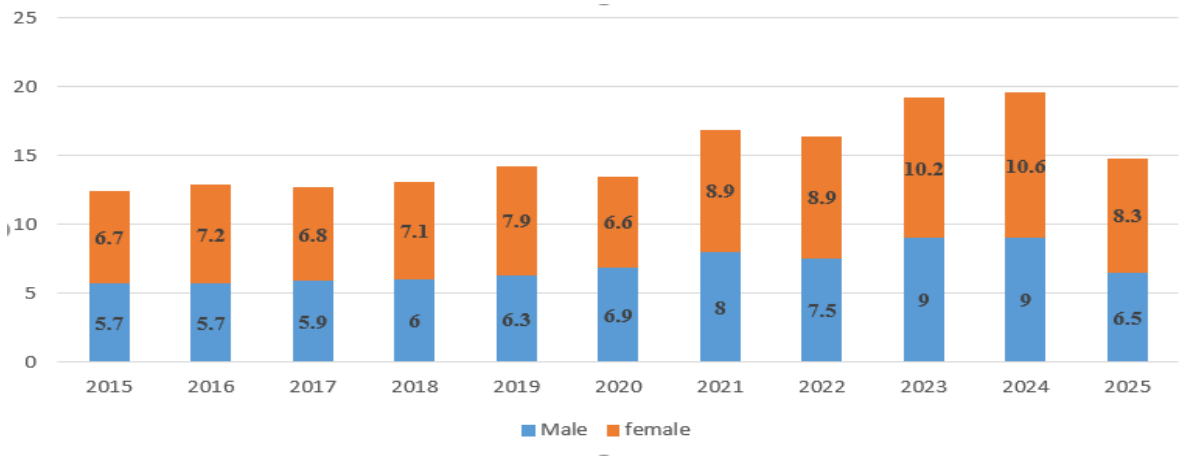

Figure 5. Dynamics of tourist flows by gender.
Source: https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators

Georgian residents travel mainly to visit relatives and friends. The number of people traveling for this purpose has increased every year during the study period, with their share in total domestic visitors varying between 45.9% and 54.5%.

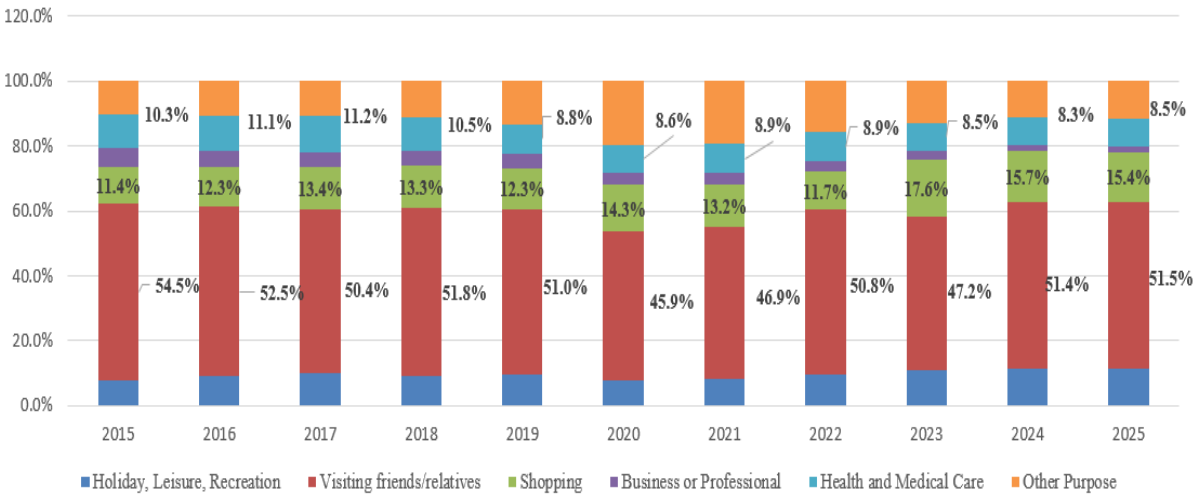

Figure 6. Distribution of domestic visitors by purpose of visit.
Source : https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/100/turizmis-statistika, 2026

As the data analysis showed, the largest number of domestic visits in Georgia are by employees and self-employed, whose share was 63.5% and 19.1%, respectively, according to 2024 data. This is logical, as domestic tourist or excursion visits, with the costs associated with the respective trips, are more affordable for the employed population.

It should be noted that in 2015-2024 this trend was unchanged and was characterized by only minor quantitative changes. The exact same trend is observed by the end of 2025.

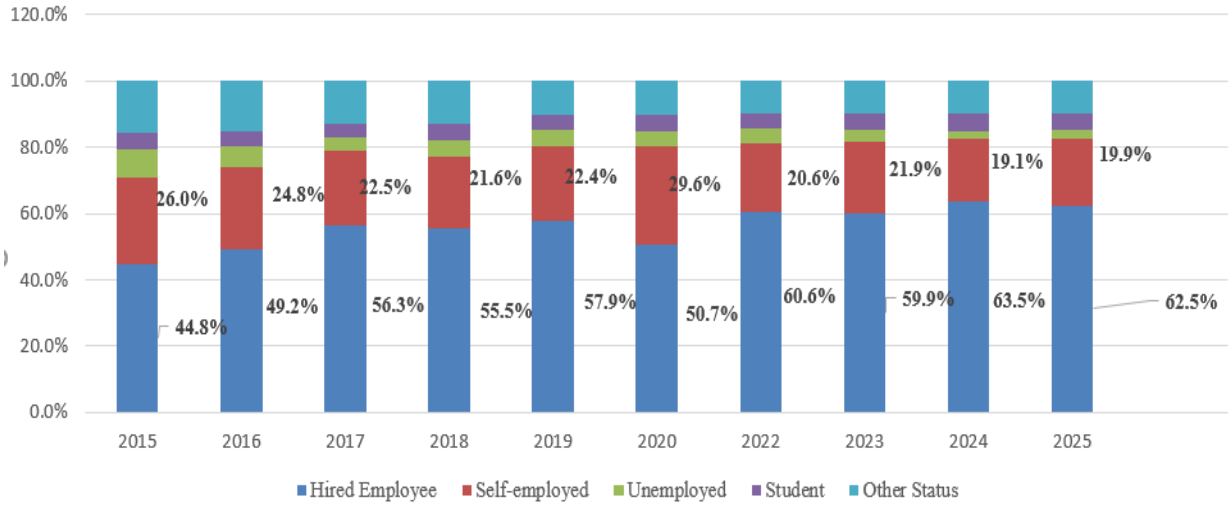

Figure 7. Distribution of domestic visitors by economic status.
Source : https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/100/turizmis-statistika, 2026

As it turned out, Georgian residents spend an average of 5.6 nights traveling within their country. The average length of stays, although increasing recently, has decreased by 11% compared to 2022. However, it has increased by 83% compared to 2015. (See Figure 7)

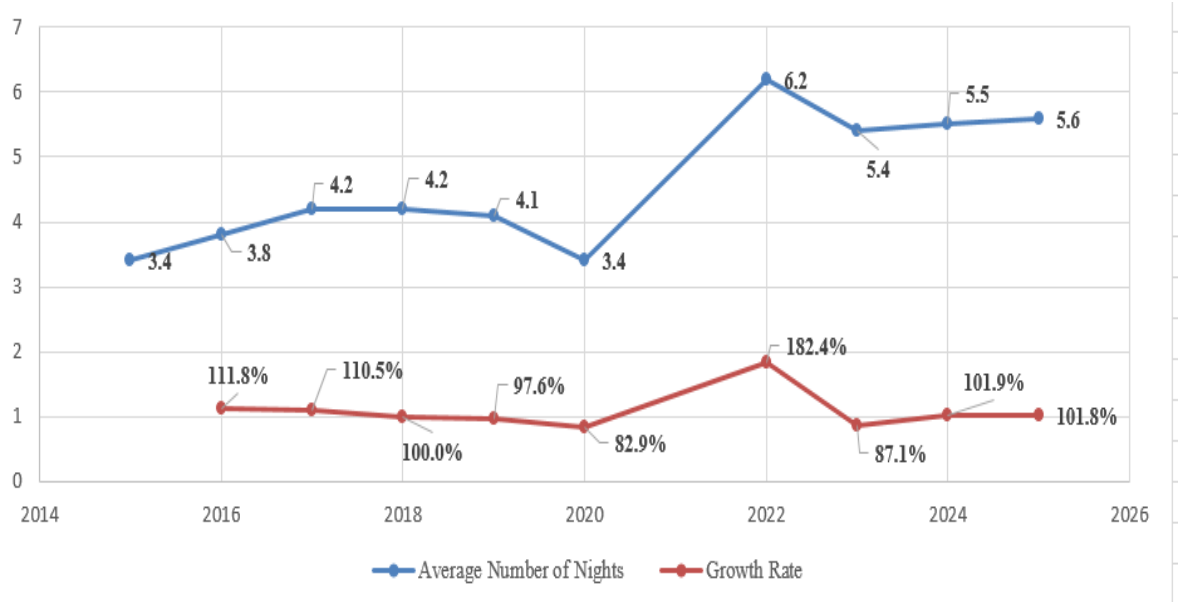

Figure 7. Distribution of Domestic Visitors by Average Number of Nights.
Source: https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/100/turizmis-statistika, 2026

The expenses incurred by visitors during this trip exceeded 15 million. A significant increase in the volume of expenses was observed after the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2022 alone, the volume of expenses increased almost 10 times. Visitors spend the most on food and shopping.

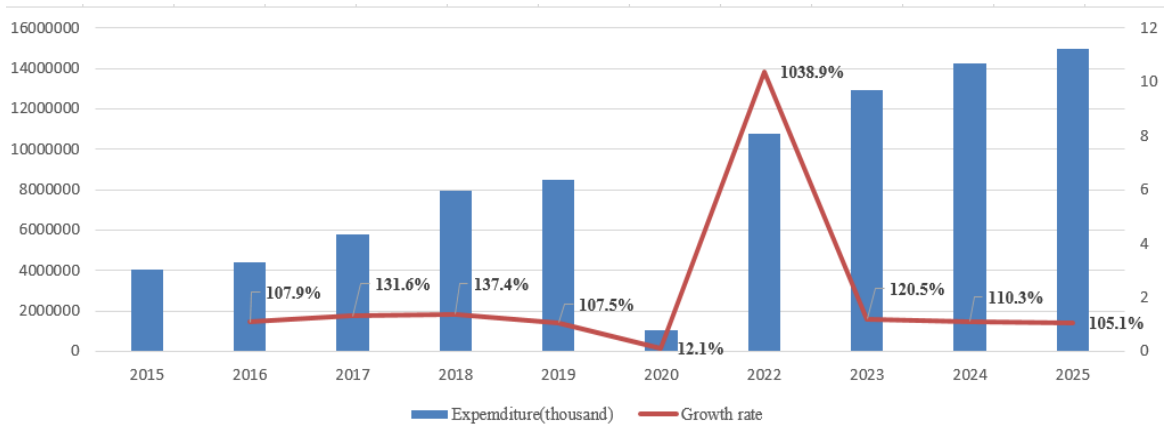

Figure 8. Distribution of visitors by Expenditure
Source: https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/101/shida-turizmi

In parallel with the total volume of expenses, let's analyze the average expenditure indicators. In 2015-2024, and then in 2025, the average domestic tourism expenditure indicator has a growing trend. From the analysis of chain indicators, it can be seen that, except for 2023, no downward trend has been detected in other years. According to the data for 2024, the average tourist expenditure is 0.18 thousand GEL, which is 5.8% higher than the previous year's indicator, but 38.5% higher than the 2019 level, and 50% higher than the 2015 level. Average tourist spending increased by an average of 5.2%.

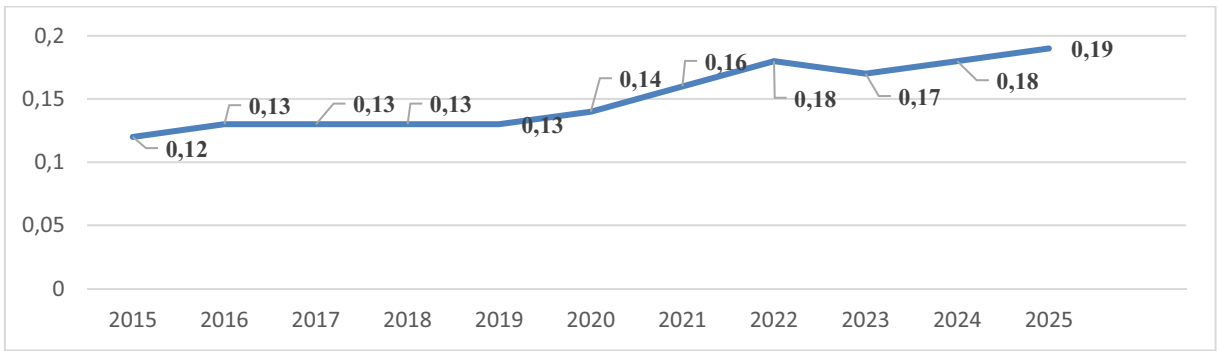

Figure 8. Distribution of visitors by average spending.
Source: https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/101/shida-turizmi

Analysis of regional data showed that the most active tourist regions are Tbilisi, Imereti and Adjara, while the fewest domestic visits were made to Samegrelo, Upper Svaneti and Shida Kartli. This trend did not change in 2015-2024, although the Mtskheta Mtianeti region also had low figures until 2020.

Table 1. Number of domestic visits by regions of Georgia

	Tbilisi	Adjara A/R	Imereti	Kakheti	Mtskheta-Mtianeti "	Samegrelo	Zemo Svaneti	Samtskhe-Javakheti	Kvemo Kartli	Shida Kartli
2015	248.7	111.7	217.1	87.4	55.5	84.0	51.3	68.9	70.7	38.8
2016	264.0	117.5	223.0	84.1	66.0	81.5	42.9	75.5	83.4	47.8
2017	269.0	136.1	196.0	73.3	64.9	77.4	48.0	68.8	75.3	49.0
2018	288.8	147.9	198.9	83.4	63.5	76.5	48.0	72.7	76.9	44.4
2019	286.9	165.0	208.0	90.2	78.3	89.2	51.3	85.4	85.9	52.6
2020	238.3	124.3	181.7	91.1	76.1	70.6	38.7	78.1	89.1	58.4
2021	300.1	163.6	241.9	119.4	133.3	93.3	54.0	117.3	124.4	68.2
2022	317.0	152.9	230.9	126.1	109.3	92.8	54.1	104.4	104.9	71.9
2023	368.2	166.5	342.6	132.8	115.2	106.3	71.6	119.6	110.5	75.2
2024	373.5	181.3	340.3	134.5	123.4	104.2	70.0	126.6	112.1	80.8

Source:https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/101/shida-turizmi

This is the general picture of the development of domestic tourism in Georgia. To find out its expectations for the future, we surveyed residents of Georgia aged 15 and older using social networks, an application compiled and built into Google Drive. The number of respondents was 402. In addition to socio-demographic questions, the questionnaire included questions about future travel, preferred locations, accompanying persons, expected expenses, and others. The survey was conducted entirely online. As a result of data analysis, it was revealed that a large majority of respondents, 78%, intend to make domestic tourist visits in the future, the majority of which will be to Tbilisi, Svaneti, and Kakheti regions. Visitors plan short-term trips, the average duration of which is 3-5 days. Domestic travel with colleagues and friends turned out to be comfortable for respondents. For a large part of them (61%) the volume of acceptable expenses was 1000-1500 GEL.

CONCLUSION

- Domestic tourism in the country has recovered rapidly after the pandemic;
- The growth rates of domestic visits during the study period were characterized by an increasing trend in almost all years;
- The younger population is particularly active among visitors;
- Analysis of regional data showed that the most active tourist regions are Tbilisi, Imereti and Adjara, while the fewest domestic visits were made to Samegrelo, Upper Svaneti and Shida Kartli;
- Analysis of visits by gender showed that women were more active;
- Average tourist spending increased by an average of 5.2%.
- Georgian residents spend an average of 5.6 nights traveling within their country. Visitors spend the most on food and shopping.

According to the results of our research,

- Some of the respondents intend to make domestic tourist visits in the future; The most popular destinations are Tbilisi, Svaneti, and Kakheti regions;
- Visitors plan short-term trips; Respondents find domestic travel with colleagues and friends comfortable;
- Respondents intend to spend up to 1000-1500 GEL on their trip.

Based on the above, it can be said that domestic tourism in Georgia is developing and its intensity is increasing every year.

It should also be noted that in parallel with domestic tourism, international outbound tourism is actively developing in Georgia. European countries are leading in the demand for

destinations for Georgian residents, which is mainly due to the operation of the low-cost airline WIZZ AIR in Georgia, the intensity of flights, diverse geographical structure and affordable prices. Georgia is an active region in terms of tourism and there are all the conditions for the development of both domestic and international tourism.

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FISCAL LEVERS FOR RESILIENT DOMESTIC TOURISM: REDUCED VAT, LOCAL TOURIST TAXES AND EU STATE-AID CONSTRAINTS WITH COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS FROM ITALY AND BULGARIA

Filippo Luigi Giambrone[1]

***Abstract**: This paper examines how two fiscal instruments - reduced value added tax (VAT) rates on tourism services and local tourist taxes - can be deployed to strengthen the resilience of domestic tourism, while remaining compliant with EU VAT harmonisation and EU State-aid control. Using a comparative legal method, the analysis focuses on Italy (where hotel accommodation is generally subject to a 10% reduced VAT rate and municipal tourist taxes are widespread) and Bulgaria (where accommodation is subject to a 9% reduced VAT rate and a municipal tourist tax applies within a statutory corridor). Building on the post-2022 reform of reduced VAT-rate rules and recent Court of Justice case law on fiscal neutrality in hotel accommodation, the paper clarifies the legal space for countercyclical VAT design (rate stability, scope definition, and neutrality vis-à-vis functionally similar services). It then assesses how tourist taxes can be made pro-resilience through seasonal modulation, earmarking to local destination management, and targeted exemptions that do not create selective advantages. Finally, the paper maps the boundary between general tax measures and selective tax advantages that may constitute State aid, and proposes compliance pathways (de minimis, GBER, or Temporary Framework-type schemes) for complementary grants or tax credits aimed at domestic demand. Policy recommendations are offered for legally robust, fiscally sustainable tourism support that balances competitiveness, overtourism concerns, and local public-finance needs.*

***Keywords**: VAT; tourist tax; domestic tourism; State aid; Italy; Bulgaria*

INTRODUCTION

Domestic tourism has re-emerged as a structural stabiliser for national tourism ecosystems. During crises that abruptly compress international demand - pandemics, geopolitical shocks, energy-price spikes, or climate-related events - domestic flows can partially smooth revenue volatility and sustain local employment. Eurostat data show that domestic travel constitutes a large share of EU tourism activity and expenditure, underpinning the policy relevance of instruments that can stimulate or re-time domestic demand without undermining fiscal sustainability.

Among the available policy tools, fiscal levers are distinctive because they can act quickly, can be scaled, and can be implemented through existing tax administration channels. Two levers are particularly salient for domestic tourism: (i) reduced VAT rates for accommodation and related services, which directly affect final prices and cashflow; and (ii) local tourist taxes (or visitor levies), which influence destination pricing and can generate own-source revenue for local destination management. Yet, in the EU, both levers operate under two layers of constraint: VAT-rate design is partly harmonised by the VAT Directive and its Annex III categories, while any selective fiscal advantage risks being classified as State aid under Article 107(1) TFEU.

This paper addresses three research questions: (1) What is the current EU legal space for using reduced VAT rates to support tourism services, and which design features are required by fiscal neutrality and recent Court of Justice case law? (2) How do Italy and Bulgaria structure tourist taxes, and which design options can make such taxes compatible with resilience objectives (countercyclicality, earmarking, destination quality) rather than merely revenue

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extraction? (3) Where is the boundary between general tax measures and selective advantages that trigger State-aid control, and which compliance pathways are available for complementary tourism support?

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a doctrinal and comparative legal methodology. First, it reconstructs the EU legal framework governing reduced VAT rates (Directive 2006/112/EC, as amended) and State-aid control (Articles 107-109 TFEU, Commission Notice on the notion of State aid, de minimis regulation, and the General Block Exemption Regulation). Second, it conducts a comparative analysis of national rules in Italy and Bulgaria on (a) VAT rates applicable to tourism services and (b) local tourist taxes, using primary legal sources (statutes, official guidance) and pertinent EU case law.

The comparative design is functional: Italy and Bulgaria share EU-law constraints but differ in institutional and fiscal architecture. Italy combines a broad municipal tax autonomy (with heterogeneous tourist-tax practices) and extensive use of tax credits in tourism policy. Bulgaria, by contrast, combines a statutory corridor for the tourist tax with a stable reduced VAT rate for accommodation and recent litigation on the conditions for applying that rate. These differences allow the analysis to test whether resilience objectives can be achieved through common legal building blocks under EU law.

RESULTS

1. Reduced VAT rates for accommodation under EU law

Under the VAT Directive, Member States must apply a standard VAT rate of at least 15% (Article 97) and may apply one or two reduced rates, generally not lower than 5%, only to categories of goods and services exhaustively listed in Annex III (Articles 98-99). Within this closed list, point 12 of Annex III expressly covers "accommodation provided in hotels and similar establishments, including the provision of holiday accommodation and the letting of places on camping or caravan sites". The "closed list" logic is designed to preserve the internal market and limit distortions, while still allowing social or sectoral policy choices.

The reform adopted by Council Directive (EU) 2022/542 modernised this architecture by expanding Member States' flexibility within the Annex III list and by introducing additional options for a super-reduced rate (below 5%) or an exemption with deductibility (0% VAT) for a limited set of essential items. The post-reform framework therefore supports more nuanced rate-setting, but it also reinforces the principle that rate differentiation must remain tied to Annex III categories and must respect fiscal neutrality.

For tourism services, neutrality constraints have been sharpened by recent Court of Justice case law. In Valentina Heights (C-733/22), the Court confirmed that Member States may set conditions for applying a reduced rate, but such conditions must not undermine fiscal neutrality. Specifically, the Court scrutinised national rules that made the 9% rate for accommodation conditional on a "categorisation certificate", highlighting that comparably supplied services cannot be treated differently without objective justification and that administrative formalities must not produce arbitrary competitive distortions. The practical implication for tourism VAT design is that reduced-rate eligibility criteria should be objectively linked to the nature of the service (accommodation) and should avoid formalistic thresholds that create discontinuities among functionally similar suppliers.

2. Italy: reduced VAT and municipal tourist taxes

Italy applies a reduced VAT rate to a wide set of tourism-related services. Official tax guidance confirms that accommodation services may fall under the 10% reduced rate provided by the VAT table annexed to Presidential Decree No. 633/1972 (e.g., item 120 of Table A, Part III, as referenced in Agenzia delle Entrate interpretative documents). Reduced-rate treatment operates as a broad, sectoral measure: it is not tied to the nationality or residence of the traveller, and therefore supports domestic tourism only indirectly (through overall price levels and industry cashflow).

On the local side, Italy's principal visitor levy is the "imposta di soggiorno", introduced by Legislative Decree No. 23/2011 (Article 4). The levy is municipal, typically charged per person per overnight stay, and its revenue is legally connected to tourism-related spending and maintenance of local assets. Subsequent legislative interventions have strengthened enforcement and clarified collection responsibilities in the context of short-term rentals and intermediaries, thereby increasing the relevance of tourist-tax design for both local finance and market regulation.

From a resilience perspective, the Italian setting demonstrates both the promise and the risk of decentralised tourist taxation: municipalities can tailor the levy to local carrying capacity and seasonality, but fragmentation can also raise compliance costs and create opaque price signals. In destinations where domestic tourism is used to compensate for volatility in international arrivals, countercyclical municipal policies (temporary reductions or caps during demand shocks, and quality-investment earmarking) become central.

3. Bulgaria: stable reduced VAT on accommodation and a corridor-based tourist tax

Bulgaria operates with a standard VAT rate of 20% and a reduced rate of 9% applicable, inter alia, to hotel accommodation and similar services. Government guidance and the official English text of the Value Added Tax Act confirm this structural reduced-rate treatment for accommodation, while noting that other temporary reduced rates (e.g., for restaurants/catering) were used as pandemic recovery measures with a defined sunset clause.

Bulgaria's tourist tax is structured as a local tax determined by municipal councils within a statutory corridor. The Ministry of Finance explains that the amount is fixed by municipal ordinance within a range (BGN 0.20 to BGN 3.00 per overnight stay), typically differentiated by settlement and accommodation category. This design provides a baseline of harmonisation (the corridor) while preserving local discretion.

The Bulgarian experience is particularly informative because the reduced VAT rate for accommodation has been litigated before the Court of Justice (C-733/22). For domestic tourism policy, this highlights a core lesson: even when a reduced rate is explicitly permitted by Annex III, the national implementation must avoid administrative filters that jeopardise neutrality, especially in markets characterised by mixed forms of accommodation (hotels, serviced apartments, holiday rentals).

Table 1. Comparative overview of key fiscal levers (Italy vs Bulgaria)

Instrument	**Italy (snapshot)**	**Bulgaria (snapshot)**
Reduced VAT for accommodation	10% reduced rate commonly applied to hotel-type accommodation (VAT table of DPR 633/1972 as interpreted by tax guidance).	9% reduced rate for hotel accommodation and similar establishments (Value Added Tax Act; supported by official guidance).
Local tourist tax / visitor levy	Municipal "imposta di soggiorno" (D. Lgs. 23/2011, art. 4), typically per person-night; heterogeneous local designs.	Municipal tourist tax set by ordinance within statutory corridor (BGN 0.20–3.00 per overnight stay).
Domestic-demand stimulus	Examples include tax credit for domestic stays ("tax credit vacanze", DL 34/2020, art. 176) as a demand-side instrument.	State-aid compliant grant schemes for tour operators and related sectors under the COVID-19 framework; demand measures vary.

DISCUSSION

The comparative results suggest that reduced VAT and tourist taxes can contribute to resilience, but only if aligned with three constraints: (i) legal constraints (Annex III scope and neutrality), (ii) fiscal constraints (revenue loss and local budget needs), and (iii) behavioural constraints (pass-through to consumer prices and demand elasticities). Reduced VAT rates are blunt instruments: they apply to all customers, including non-residents, and their capacity to stimulate domestic demand depends on market pass-through and competitive structure. However, VAT reductions may still enhance resilience by stabilising cashflow and reducing failure risk among accommodation providers during demand shocks.

Tourist taxes, by contrast, are intrinsically local and can be tuned to manage both resilience and sustainability. A countercyclical design would allow temporary rate reductions or exemptions in periods of shock, while maintaining destination-financing capacity through earmarking and transparent reporting. Seasonal modulation can also redirect demand from peak to shoulder seasons, easing overtourism pressures while keeping domestic flows stable. The Bulgarian "corridor" model provides a legal mechanism to prevent extremes, whereas Italy's decentralised model provides maximum local flexibility at the cost of fragmentation.

EU State-aid rules form the central legal boundary for more selective fiscal interventions. Article 107(1) TFEU prohibits aid granted by the State or through State resources in any form whatsoever which distorts or threatens to distort competition by favouring certain undertakings or the production of certain goods, in so far as it affects trade between Member States. For tax measures, the key risk factor is selectivity: a measure that derogates from the 'normal' tax system and favours a subset of undertakings may constitute State aid. General measures applicable to all undertakings in a comparable legal and factual situation generally fall outside Article 107(1).

Where selectivity cannot be avoided (e.g., targeted relief for tourism SMEs in depressed regions or for specific investment in destination infrastructure), compliance strategies are available. Small amounts of aid can be granted under the general de minimis regulation (threshold €300,000 over three fiscal years). Larger interventions can be structured under the General Block Exemption Regulation (GBER) for eligible categories, including certain regional aid schemes relevant to tourism activities. During systemic crises, temporary frameworks have been used to approve liquidity and compensation schemes for tourism undertakings; both Italy

and Bulgaria implemented Commission-approved schemes for tourism sectors affected by the coronavirus outbreak.

A practical policy package for resilient domestic tourism under EU constraints could therefore combine: (1) stable reduced VAT treatment for accommodation (within Annex III point 12) with neutrality-compliant eligibility criteria; (2) a destination-level tourist tax that is seasonally modulated and earmarked to visitor-management and quality investment; and (3) complementary, time-bound support for tourism undertakings designed under de minimis or GBER, avoiding discretionary or case-by-case tax rulings that raise selectivity concerns. Importantly, instruments aimed at residents (e.g., domestic travel tax credits) should be designed as consumer-side support, with clear operational rules, to minimise State-aid exposure and administrative friction.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that domestic-tourism resilience in the EU can be strengthened through a carefully sequenced use of two fiscal levers—reduced VAT rates for accommodation and local tourist taxes—provided that their legal design is aligned with (i) VAT harmonisation and fiscal neutrality, and (ii) the boundary between general tax measures and selective advantages under Article 107(1) TFEU. The Italy–Bulgaria comparison shows that similar EU constraints can produce very different policy "operating systems": Italy's fragmented municipal landscape favours fine-tuning but increases complexity, whereas Bulgaria's corridor-based tourist tax and stable reduced VAT rate support predictability and administrability.

On the VAT side, the post-2022 reform of reduced-rate rules confirms that Member States retain meaningful room for policy, but the room is not unlimited. The key compliance insight is that reduced-rate eligibility conditions must be anchored to the objective nature of the service—accommodation in hotels and similar establishments within Annex III—and cannot be implemented through purely formal administrative gates that generate competitive discontinuities. In practice, this calls for "neutrality-by-design" VAT drafting: clear scope definitions for functionally similar forms of accommodation (hotels, serviced apartments, holiday rentals), proportionate documentation requirements, and guidance that minimises borderline classification disputes. Within these constraints, a stable reduced VAT rate can still serve resilience objectives by supporting liquidity, reducing insolvency risk in downturns, and lowering the pass-through threshold for price promotions aimed at residents.

On the local-tax side, the tourist tax can be transformed from a static revenue tool into a resilience and sustainability instrument. Three design options emerge as legally and economically credible. First, seasonal modulation (or "shoulder-season rebates") can smooth domestic demand while reducing peak congestion. Second, transparent earmarking to destination management—such as visitor-flow control, environmental maintenance, and local mobility—can increase legitimacy and improve the quality of the domestic tourism product. Third, targeted exemptions should be framed as objective, non-discretionary rules (e.g., minors, disability-related exemptions, emergency situations) to avoid creating selective advantages for particular undertakings or categories of accommodation.

EU State-aid control is the decisive constraint when fiscal measures become selective. General measures—such as a reduced VAT rate applicable to all suppliers of a defined Annex III category, or a tourist tax that applies across a municipality under objective criteria—are less likely to qualify as aid. Conversely, relief limited to certain operators, categories, or locations may be selective and thus requires a compliance pathway. For practical policy-making, this implies a clear sequencing logic: begin with general instruments (VAT scope clarity; tourist-tax governance), and reserve selective measures for well-targeted market failures (investment

in accessibility, digitalisation, decarbonisation, or crisis liquidity), structured under de minimis or GBER where possible, with explicit duration limits and transparency duties.

A compact "EU-robust" package for domestic-tourism resilience can therefore be expressed as a checklist. (1) VAT: keep the reduced rate within Annex III accommodation; align eligibility rules with neutrality and functional similarity; avoid arbitrary certification gates; provide binding administrative guidance. (2) Tourist tax: adopt a corridor or caps where needed to prevent excessive dispersion; modulate seasonally; earmark revenues with public reporting; ensure collection is efficient for short-term rentals. (3) Complementary support: if grants or credits are needed, apply objective criteria, automatic calculation, and non-discretionary administration; prefer de minimis/GBER; document the policy rationale and monitor effects to avoid overcompensation.

Finally, the comparative analysis suggests two directions for future research. First, empirical evaluation of VAT pass-through in accommodation markets is needed to quantify how much reduced rates translate into lower prices for resident travellers versus higher margins. Second, the governance dimension of local tourist taxes—particularly earmarking, accountability, and interaction with platform-based rentals—deserves deeper investigation to ensure that resilience objectives do not conflict with equity and local public-finance sustainability. Overall, the paper's central conclusion is that fiscal resilience in tourism is not achieved by "more" taxation or "less" taxation, but by legally disciplined tax architecture that aligns neutrality, competitiveness, and destination stewardship.

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DOMESTIC LEISURE TOURISM IN SOUTH CENTRAL REGION IN BULGARIA: PUBLIC ATTITUDES AND PERSPECTIVES

Marina Raykova[1]

ABSTRACT: *In Bulgaria, tourism plays a significant role in country's economy. Domestic tourism is an important part of it, especially during crises, serving as leverage and helping the industry survive. The current paper aims to present the public attitudes toward domestic leisure tourism of the South Central region population in Bulgaria using results from National representative survey. The scope of the study are winter and summer leisure tourism. The obtained results are analyzed and conclusions are provided at the end. The recommendations include guidelines for improving the quality of the Bulgarian leisure tourism product and attract more domestic tourists.*

KEYWORDS: *domestic tourism, leisure tourism, Bulgaria, South Central region, public attitudes*

INTRODUCTION

Bulgarian tourism sector is one of the most important industries in country's economy. As part of it, domestic tourism proved its importance as an economic booster in times of crises, especially during the most severe one, the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, 89% of Bulgarian citizens' tourism spendings belong to domestic tourism and 86% in 2020, compared to 54% in 2019 (National Statistical Institute, Business Statistics: Tourism, n.d.). The possibilities for tourism in Bulgaria are very diverse and include natural and anthropogenic resources, the potential of which is still developing today (Mancheva-Ali & Kostadinova, 2023). Practicing leisure tourism, especially during summer holidays, is a common practice in Bulgaria.

The current study presents the public attitudes toward domestic leisure tourism of the Bulgarian South Central (SC) region residents. Winter and summer leisure tourism are the main scope of the research. Data were collected based on the previous NUTS-2 regional structure of Bulgaria, which divided the country into six planning regions, including the South Central region. As of February 16th, 2026, the new version of the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS 2027) has entered into force, adopted by the European Commission via Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2026/195 (EUR-Lex, 2026). As of January 1st, 2027, all regional statistical data will be produced, published, and disseminated in accordance with the new version of the nomenclature (National Statistical Institute, 2026). So, it is correct to present data according to the old division till the end of 2026. According to previous version, there are 1299 settlements included in the region (of which 54 cities and 1245 villages) distributed in 58 municipalities and five districts – Haskovo, Kardzhali, Pazardzhik, Plovdiv and Smolyan (National Statistical Institute, National Register of Populated Places, n.d.).

The area of the region is approx. 22,365 km² or 20.1% of the country's territory (Ministry of Transport and Communications, 2015). As of December 31st, 2024 the region's population is 1 306 492 (National Statistical Institute, Population, 2025). The occupancy rate in the region (people aged 15-64 years) is 59.7% and the unemployment rate is 10.9% (National Statistical Institute, 2021 Census Statistical Guide, 2023). The share of the population over 7 years with secondary education is 47.1% and with higher education is 20.9% (National Statistical Institute, 2021 Census Statistical Guide, 2023). Persons aged 16-74 using the Internet every day or at least once a week are 83.7% of region's population (National Statistical Institute,

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Individuals Regularly Using the Internet, 2025).

The transport network plays an important role in the economic development of the South Central region and particularly in terms of tourism. Part of the Pan-European transport corridors No. 4, No. 8, No. 10 and a small part of No. 9, connecting the countries of Western and Central Europe through the Bulgarian section Ruse–Veliko Tarnovo–Stara Zagora–Haskovo with the port of Alexandroupolis on the Aegean Sea, pass through its territory. The transport corridor Orient/Eastern Mediterranean, part of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), through the Trakia highway, passes through three of the districts of the region – Pazardzhik, Plovdiv and Haskovo. E-80 passes through the Trakia and Maritsa highways, through the districts of Pazardzhik, Plovdiv and Haskovo. European route E-85 passes through the district of Haskovo (Varadzhakova, 2025). Trakia highway connects the region with the Black Sea coast. Over 97% of the roads in the South Central region are asphalted (National Statistical Institute, National Road Network by Type of Pavement, 2025). The length of the road network is 4,108 km, of which 193 km are highways and 416 km are first-class roads (National Statistical Institute, National Road Network by Road Category, 2025). The region is served by four main railway lines (Varadzhakova, 2025). Air transport in the region is developed through Plovdiv International Airport, located in the area of the village of Krumovo, 12 km from the city of Plovdiv. Regular international and seasonal charter flights are operated from it (Varadzhakova, 2025). Because of its geographical position, water transport is not developed in SC region.

One of the resorts in SC region, Pamporovo, is declared of national importance. It is situated in Rhodope Mountains, in the district of Smolyan (Regulation No14 on resort resources, resort areas and resorts, 1987). It is a popular ski resort amongst Bulgarian and international tourists.

METHODOLOGY

The current research uses data from national representative face-to-face tablet survey based on a random sample stratified by the Bulgarian districts (28) and the residence place size (capital, district administrative center, town and village). The survey consists of several main groups of questions - demographic panel, winter leisure tourism, summer leisure tourism, sources of information, tourism practices, etc. In order to enlighten the specifics of public attitudes towards domestic leisure tourism of the residents of the SC region a statistical analysis was executed. It includes the following indicators: domestic leisure tourism practices, main reasons for not travelling in Bulgaria for leisure tourism purposes in the last 5 years, frequency of travel, average length of stay, means of transport used, travel arrangement practices, main advantages and disadvantages of Bulgarian leisure tourism, holiday satisfaction degree, competitive advantages of destinations outside Bulgaria for leisure tourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

South Central region residents prefer summer than winter leisure tourism. Almost ¾ (72.6%) of the population hasn't been on a domestic winter holiday in the last 5 years, while more than ¾ (76.6%) has practiced summer leisure tourism in Bulgaria (Table 1).

Table 1. Domestic leisure tourism practices of the SC region residents

Question	Answer	(%)
In the last 5 years, have you travelled in Bulgaria for winter leisure tourism purposes?	Yes	27.4%
	No	72.6%
In the last 5 years, have you travelled in Bulgaria for summer leisure tourism purposes?	Yes	76.6%
	No	23.4%

Lack of financial resources, lack of enough free time and family reasons are between the main reasons for not practicing leisure tourism in the country. In SC region the non-participation financial barrier in terms of summer vacations is the highest among all the regions (Table 2).

Table 2. Main reasons for not travelling in Bulgaria for leisure tourism purposes in the last 5 years (SC region residents)

Main reasons for not travelling in Bulgaria for leisure tourism purposes in the last 5 years	Winter	Summer
Lack of financial resources	45.9%	66.0%
Lack of enough free time	18.5%	8.5%
Family reasons	14.4%	6,4%
Lack of suitable accommodation facilities	2.7%	6.4%
Other	17.1%	12.8%

Only 1% of the region's population travel every month for purposes of domestic leisure tourism, which is the highest result among the regions (together with Southwestern region). Over 2/3 of the respondents travel once a year or several times a year. Only 5% of the residents do not travel in Bulgaria for their holidays, which makes them the most loyal ones compared to the other regions (Figure 1).

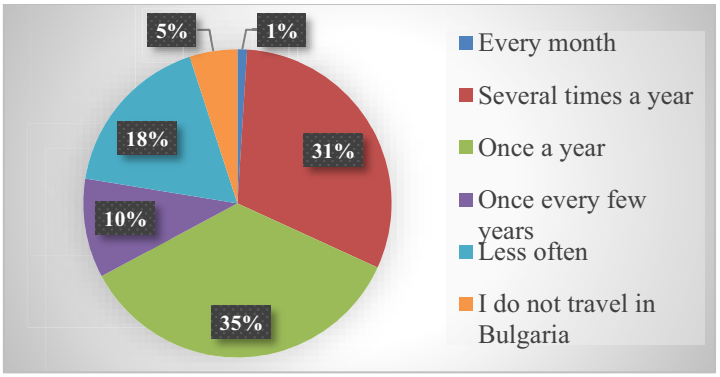

Figure 1. Frequency of travel for purposes of domestic leisure tourism of the SC region residents

The average length of stay for winter leisure tourism, measured in the number of nights spent, is 3.89. The most popular period is 3 nights (44%). For their summer holidays the SC region residents prefer to stay 5 (34%) or 7 (21%) nights with an average length of stay of 5.77 nights. The respondents point out the personal vehicles as a preferred means of transportation to the resorts (84%). Intercity bus lines and railway transport have a much smaller share (Figure 2).

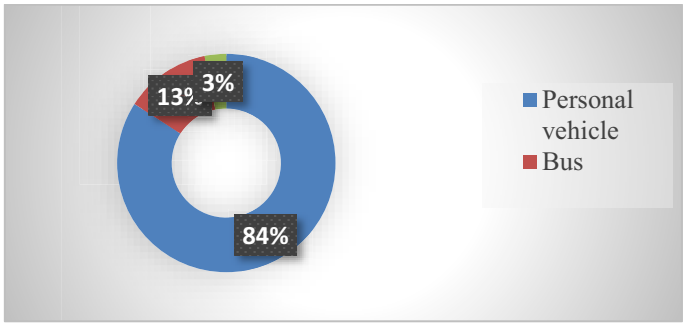

Figure 2. Means of transport used by SC region residents when practicing domestic leisure tourism

Compared to the other regions, SC region residents are the ones that visit recommended places most frequently and use online booking systems and tour operator services the least (Figure 3).

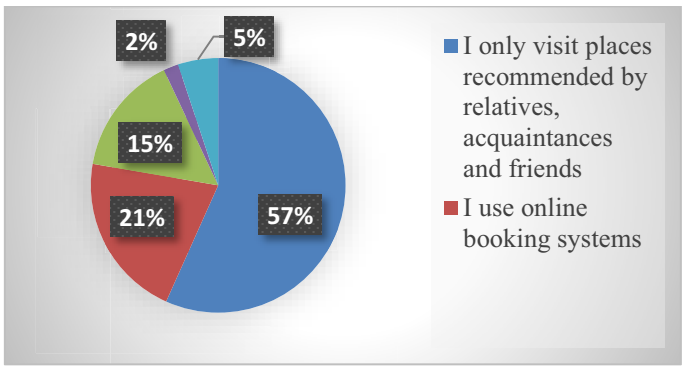

Figure 3. Travel arrangement practices of SC region residents when practicing domestic leisure tourism

South Central region residents point out the attractive natural resorts and the opportunities to practice different types of tourism as the main advantages of the Bulgarian leisure tourism, even they are the ones that appreciate the least the winter leisure tourism natural resources. Similar to the other regions, the high prices trouble them the most (Table 3 and Table 4).

Table 3. Main advantages and disadvantages of Bulgarian winter leisure tourism according to SC region residents

Advantages		Disadvantages	
Attractive natural resources	39.8%	High prices	50.7%
Opportunities to practice different types of tourism	24.4%	Unsuitable natural conditions	17.9%
Good accommodation facilities	20.4%	Unmaintained road network to and within the resorts	10.0%
Suitable facilities for practicing winter sports	18.9%	Low quality of service	9.5%
Close to home	14.9%	Overbuilding	5.0%
Good opportunities for entertainment, variety in everyday life, new experiences, etc.	10.4%	Insufficient or poor-quality facilities for practicing winter sports	4.0%

Table 4. Main advantages and disadvantages of Bulgarian summer leisure tourism according to SC region residents

Advantages		Disadvantages	
Attractive natural resources	64.7%	High prices	51.0%
Opportunities to practice different types of tourism	13.9%	Overbuilding	24.5%
Attractive prices	12.9%	Very crowded	16.0%
Wide choice of destinations	11.4%	Low quality of service	13.5%
Close to home	11.4%	Low hygiene	13.0%
Good accommodation facilities	9.5%	Not enough parking spaces	9.0%

During the interview the respondents from SC region were asked to rate their winter holiday satisfaction in the last five years. For these purposes a 7-grade scale was used where 1 means "absolutely not satisfied" and 7 means "absolutely satisfied". The average satisfaction degree is 5.49 and it is important to mention that none of the respondents gave rates 1 (absolutely not satisfied) and 2 (not satisfied). As per their summer holidays, the average satisfaction degree is 5.02 and only 0.6% gave rate 1 (absolutely not satisfied).

Only 2.5% of the region's residents have traveled abroad for purposes of winter leisure tourism in the last 5 years, which is the lowest result compared to the other 5 regions. They preferred Austria and Germany because of the highest quality of services and the better infrastructure for practicing winter sports. As per the summer holidays, the percentage is much higher (27%) and the most popular destinations are Greece and Turkey because of the highest quality of services, the cleaner beaches and sea water, and the lower prices in accommodations of the same category.

CONCLUSIONS

South Central region population prefers to travel during the summer holidays (2.8 more compared to winter vacations). Financial constraints are the main non-participation barrier for the people that do not travel domestically and the high prices is the fact that troubles the most those who do. The overbuilding and the crowds became a serious problem in country's summer resorts in 21st century. Bulgaria's main competitors in terms of leisure tourism attract tourists with higher quality of services, better pricing, and sustainable and environmentally friendly practices. Having in mind the research findings, it can be concluded that SC region residents need to be retained in Bulgarian resorts with competitive pricing campaigns, effective sustainable development and ecological policies and their strict monitoring and adherence, improvement of the quality of services, modernization of the ski facilities, regular maintenance of the road network to and in the resorts, etc.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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DOMESTIC WELLNESS TOURISM IN GEORGIA

Ana Abesadze[1]

***Abstract**: In parallel with the modern trends in tourism in the world, the process of diversification of tourism has begun in Georgia, and the growth trends of new directions have become increasingly evident. Among them is wellness tourism, which is becoming more attractive and in demand for tourists for Georgian residents every year. The purpose of the paper is to identify and analyze the main trends in the development of domestic wellness tourism in Georgia. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the research. Emphasis was placed on averages, time series, and variation indicators. Results: After the pandemic, the attitude of Georgian residents towards recreation, health maintenance, and tourism has transformed. Tourism in Georgia, amid the growing pace of visits, has approached the pre-pandemic level of 2019. Although the number of wellness visits decreased in 2025, the trend has been growing recently. Although the total domestic tourism expenditure in Georgia grew by 6.7% annually during the study period (the average annual growth rate is 107%), a 33% decline was recorded in 2025. Despite this, the share of expenditure on treatment and rehabilitation in total tourism expenditure has almost remained the same. The share of wellness visits among domestic tourism visits is increasing, although it is still below the level of 2019. Visitors spend less time on treatment and rehabilitation visits than on tourism in general.*

***Keywords:** wellness, tourist, spending, trend, analysis*

INTRODUCTION

In parallel with modern tourism trends around the world, the process of tourism diversification has begun in Georgia, and opportunities have emerged to offer services focused on the new demands of modern society. (Abesadze, Statistical trends in the development of global wellness tourism (wellness) in Georgia, 2024)

Today, in the modern era of economic development, tourism is a very important source of development and economic growth. (Abesadze, Kinkladze, Paresashvili, Chitaladze, & Meishvili, 2020). Expectations for the revival of domestic tourism can be multifaceted.

Today we can safely say that one of its priority directions can even be considered medical tourism, which carries a certain niche for our country. The medical "secrets" of Georgia, the unique natural resources necessary for health, give medical tourism the opportunity to develop as a priority. Georgia is slowly becoming one of the primary destinations for medical and plastic surgery, cosmetic, dental healthcare, balneological reproductive services, vision correction (excimer laser method); treatment of ischemic heart diseases (stenting, shunting); treatment with phages (an exclusive type, since the Tbilisi bacteriophage is one of the unique institutions in the world) and others (Abesadze, Robitashvili, Abesadze, & Kinkladze, 2023).

Balneological resources, climatic zones, the unity of healing mineral waters and landscapes create the best conditions for the development of the wellness industry. In addition, there are about 2,400 types of natural water sources in Georgia, although their level of awareness based on their tourist and health-improving properties is still low. Sulfur waters, health-improving procedures of Sairme, Tskaltubo, Borjomi, Akhtala and other places, with the right approach and assessments, can become a catalyst for the development of wellness tourism in Georgia.

Wellness tourism is a new approach to recreation. The main prerequisite for sustainability is the development of this tourism product, green environment, thermal springs, clean mountains and the recreational potential of the landscape. (Staneva, 2019) A specific

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approach to tourism management is needed for the intelligent (smart) management of tourism resources. (Erdem & Seker, F., 2022)

Wellness tourism is developing in Georgia. This is evidenced by the statistical characteristics of resort and recreation areas, special therapeutic sanatoriums.

MAIN TEXT

In Georgia, 103 resorts and 167 resort areas are officially registered (Georgian Wellness Tourism: Demand and Prospects., 2023) Although wellness tourism is a global trend, at this stage wellness is not yet popular among locals in the country. (Georgian Wellness Tourism: Demand and Prospects., 2023)

Resorts with healing properties in Georgia are located on the Black Sea coast, as well as in high-mountainous regions. Therefore, the medical and health resorts of Georgia include three regionally significant seas, mountain, and peloid resorts. The number of premium-class wellness spaces and interest in them is gradually increasing. This is evidenced by the increased statistics of health tourism flows.

In recent years, the number of domestic tourist visits has been increasing, and accordingly, the number of visits for health tourism purposes has also increased, but in 2025, a decline was observed in both directions. Overall tourist visits decreased by 19%, while health and medical tourist visits decreased by more, by 25%. See Diagram 1.

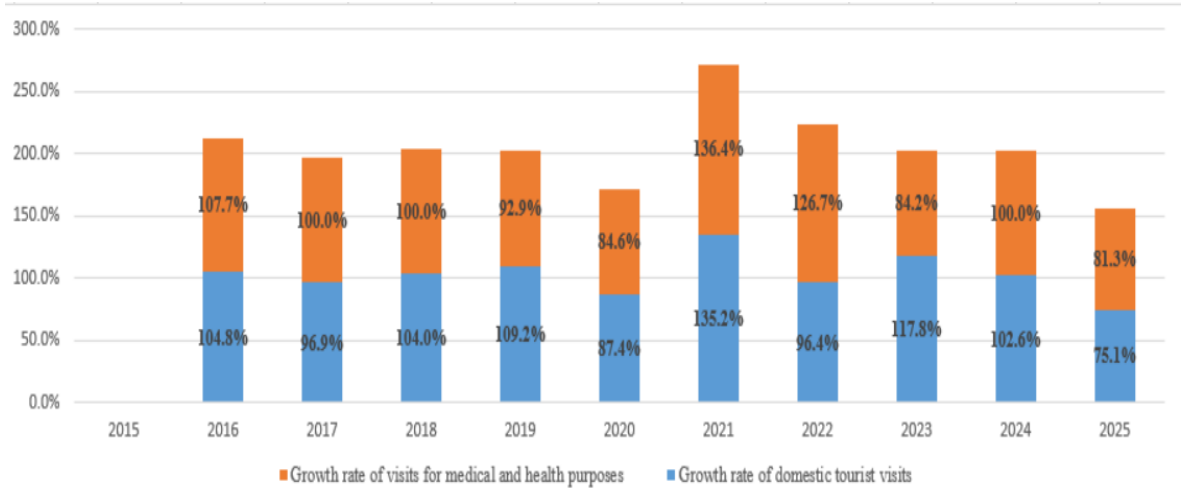

Diagram 1. Dynamics of growth rates of domestic visits and tourist visits for medical and health purposes.

Source : https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators, 2026

Georgian residents made 1.3 million visits for treatment and rehabilitation in 2025, which is similar to the figures for 2019 and 2015. In fact, the trend did not change during the study period, nor were any structural changes identified in tourism in Georgia. See Figure 2

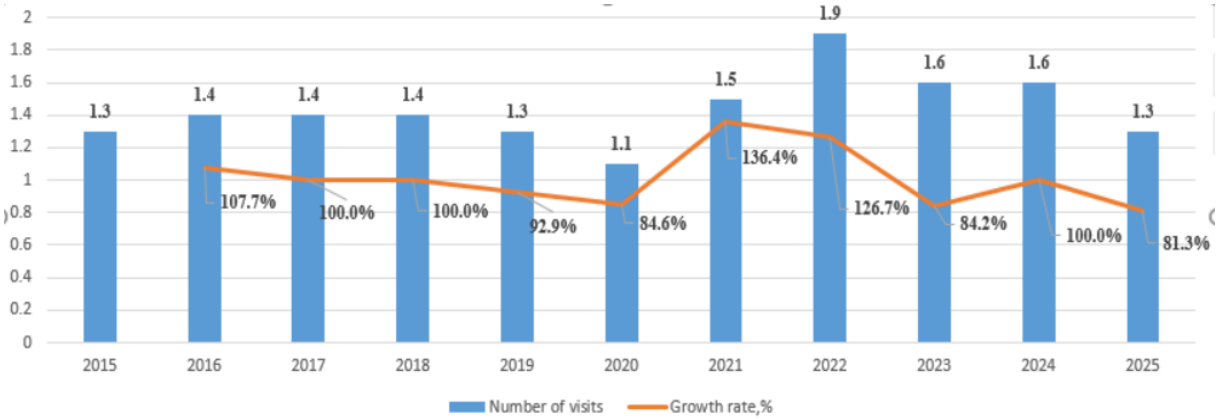

Figure 2. Dynamics of the number and growth rates of visits for health care purposes(Mil)
Source : https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators, 2026

The trends in domestic tourism are given in Figure 3, which presents the dynamics of the share of visits for treatment and rehabilitation in total domestic visits. (See Figure 3) Today, according to official statistics, the share of treatment and rehabilitation visits in total domestic tourism is only 8.8%. While in 2022 it was 11.7%.

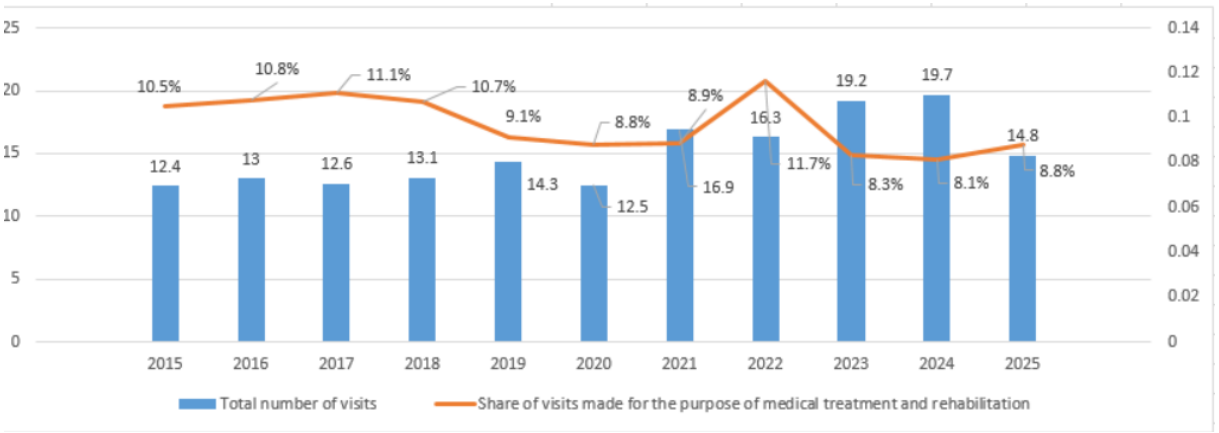

Figure 3. Overall domestic tourist visits and dynamics of the share of treatment and rehabilitation visits in them, %
Source : https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators, 2026

Interesting trends were identified in tourism spending. On average, domestic tourism spending on treatment and rehabilitation increased by 2.9% each year over the study period, however, the 22.8% growth rate in 2024 was replaced by a 23% decline in 2025. The highest growth rate in domestic tourism spending was in 2021, when it approached almost 55%.

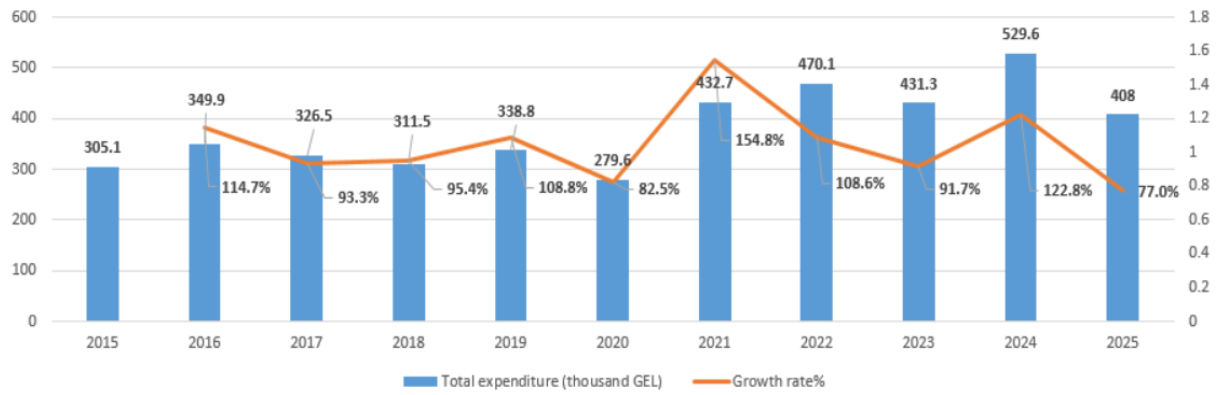

Diagram 4. Amount of expenses incurred for medical treatment for health purposes (thousands of GEL) and its growth dynamics

Source : https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators, 2026

The decrease in 2025 can be explained by the decrease in tourism spending in the country in general. Although, during the study period, domestic tourism spending in Georgia grew by 6.7% annually (the average annual growth rate is 107%), in 2025 a 33% decrease was recorded. Despite this, the share of spending on treatment and rehabilitation in total tourism spending has almost remained the same. In 2025, it is at the level of 14.6%, which is only 0.1 percentage points less than the previous year. In general, the amount of spending on treatment and rehabilitation is characterized by an increasing trend (except for 2025), but, conversely, the dynamics of its share in total domestic tourism spending did not show this trend. See Figure 5

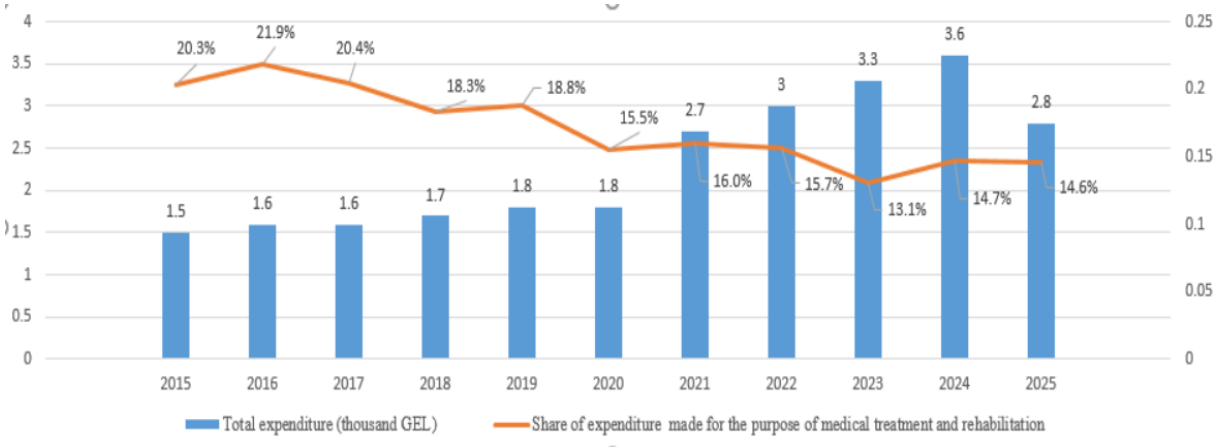

Figure 5. Dynamics of the share of medical and health tourism in total domestic tourism expenditure

Source : https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators, 2026

As can be seen from the diagram, the share of expenditures for medical and health care varies between 14.6% and 21.9%, with the lowest figure recorded in the current year, 2025. The degree of change in the variation is medium.

It should be noted that the number of nights spent on medical and health care visits is decreasing during domestic tourism. For example, if in general, Georgian residents spent 2.2 days during domestic tourism in 2015, this figure decreased to 1.5 in 2025.

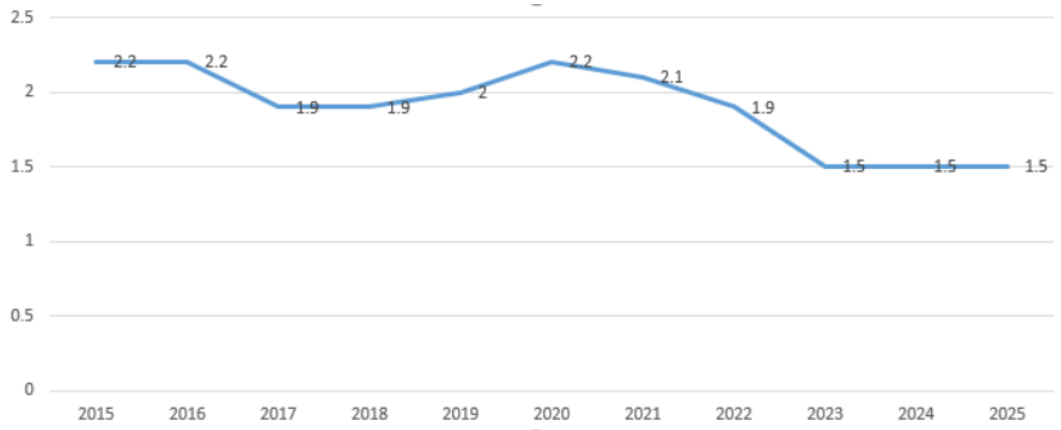

Figure 6. Dynamics of the number of nights spent during total domestic tourism
Source : https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators, 2026

Visitors spend less time on treatment and recovery. If in 2015, Georgian residents spent an average of 1.9 days on treatment and recovery, in 2025 this figure decreased to 1.1 days.

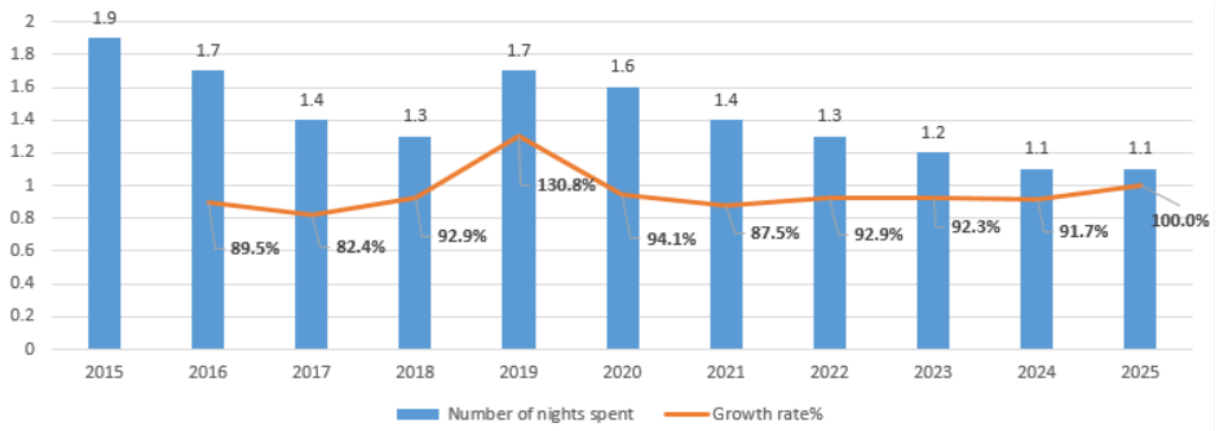

Figure 7. Dynamics of nights spent in hospital for recovery purposes and growth rates.
Source : https://tourism.geostat.ge/categories/CDefaultIndicators, 2026

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that wellness tourism in Georgia is slowly but surely developing. After the pandemic, the attitude of Georgian residents towards recreation, health maintenance and wellness has transformed. Tourism in Georgia, amid the growing pace of visits, has approached the pre-pandemic level of 2019. Although the number of wellness visits decreased in 2025, the recent trend has been increasing.

Although, during the study period, domestic tourism spending in Georgia as a whole grew by 6.7% annually (the average annual growth rate is 107%), in 2025 a 33% decrease was observed. Despite this, the share of expenses for treatment and recovery in total tourism spending has almost remained the same.

The share of wellness visits among domestic tourism trips is increasing, although it is still below the level of 2019. Visitors spend less time on visits for treatment and recovery than on tourism in general.

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TOURISM COMPETITIVENESS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BASED ON THE TRAVEL & TOURISM DEVELOPMENT INDEX

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ABSTRACT: *Tourism competitiveness plays an increasingly important role in shaping the economic performance and development prospects of emerging tourism destinations. The aim of this study is to analyse tourism competitiveness in the Western Balkans and to evaluate its position within the broader context of the Balkans and Eastern Europe region. The research focuses on five Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia – and compares their tourism performance with other countries in the region and with the leading European tourism economies. The analysis is based on the Travel & Tourism Development Index, which evaluates tourism development through five dimensions and seventeen pillars. The results indicate that Western Balkan countries generally achieve lower overall index scores compared to the most competitive European tourism destinations. Nevertheless, certain positive trends are observed, including improvements in tourism policy prioritization, competitive pricing conditions and relatively favourable safety indicators. The findings suggest that strengthening tourism competitiveness in the Western Balkans will require further investment in infrastructure development, improved destination management and stronger promotion of cultural and natural tourism assets. Addressing these challenges may contribute to enhancing the role of tourism as an important driver of economic development and regional integration in Southeast Europe.*

KEYWORDS: *Tourism Competitiveness; Tourism Development; Travel & Tourism Development Index; Western Balkans*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the most dynamic sectors of the global economy and an important driver of economic growth, employment generation and regional development. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (2024), the travel and tourism sector generated US$10.9 trillion in global GDP in 2024, representing approximately 10% of the global economy, while supporting 357 million jobs worldwide, which corresponds to roughly one in every ten jobs globally. Domestic tourism spending reached US$5.3 trillion, representing a 5.4% increase compared to 2023, while international visitor spending grew by 11.6% to US$1.9 trillion, highlighting the continued expansion of tourism demand worldwide (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2024).

These figures confirm the growing role of tourism as a significant contributor to economic development and labour market performance across both developed and emerging economies. Recent empirical research also emphasizes the strong relationship between tourism development and economic growth, suggesting that the economic impact of tourism is particularly influenced by institutional quality and tourism policy frameworks (Sun et al., 2025). Moreover, recent studies highlight that tourism competitiveness and destination management play a crucial role in shaping the economic benefits derived from tourism activities and the long-term sustainability of tourism development (Sun et al., 2025; Li et al, 2025).

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Tourism competitiveness refers to the ability of a destination to create favourable conditions for tourism development through effective policy frameworks, developed infrastructure, diversified tourism products and sustainable resource management (Croes & Kubickova, 2013). Destinations that successfully combine these elements are more likely to improve their position in the international tourism market and increase the economic contribution of tourism to national development (Dupeyras & MacCallum, 2013).

This issue is particularly relevant for emerging tourism destinations, including the Western Balkan countries. These countries possess considerable tourism potential due to their natural landscapes, cultural heritage and favourable geographic location within Europe. In recent years, tourism has increasingly been recognized as a strategic sector for economic development in the region (Kalaj, 2025). Nevertheless, the tourism competitiveness of these countries remains lower compared to the leading European tourism economies.

In order to assess tourism competitiveness and identify structural determinants of tourism development, several analytical frameworks have been developed. One of the most widely used approaches is the Travel & Tourism Development Index (TTDI), developed by the World Economic Forum. The TTDI provides a comprehensive assessment of tourism development conditions through multiple dimensions, including the enabling environment, tourism policy and enabling conditions, infrastructure and services, tourism resources and sustainability (World Economic Forum, 2024).

The objective of this study is to analyse tourism competitiveness and economic performance in the Western Balkans within the broader context of the Balkans and Eastern Europe region. Using the TTDI as the main analytical framework, the study compares the tourism competitiveness of Western Balkan countries with other countries in the region and with the leading European tourism economies. By analysing both overall index scores and pillar-level indicators, the research aims to identify key structural factors influencing tourism development and to highlight opportunities for strengthening tourism competitiveness in the Western Balkan region.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis of tourism competitiveness and economic performance in this study is based on the TTDI that represents a comprehensive analytical framework designed to measure the factors and policies that enable sustainable and resilient development of the travel and tourism sector. The index provides a multidimensional assessment of tourism competitiveness by combining a wide range of indicators related to economic environment, tourism policy, infrastructure, tourism resources and sustainability.

The TTDI consists of five main dimensions: (1) Enabling environment, (2) Travel and tourism policy and enabling conditions, (3) Infrastructure and services, (4) Travel and tourism resources, and (5) Travel and tourism sustainability. These dimensions are further divided into seventeen pillars that capture the structural determinants influencing tourism development in national economies. The index values range from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating stronger performance and more favourable conditions for tourism sector development.

This research focuses on the countries belonging to the "Balkans and Eastern Europe" group within the TTDI report (World Economic Forum, 2024). Special attention is given to the Western Balkan economies, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. These countries represent emerging tourism destinations whose tourism sectors play an increasingly important role in economic development and regional cooperation. For comparative purposes, the analysis also includes other countries from the

Balkans and Eastern Europe region, as well as the twelve highest-ranked European tourism economies according to the TTDI 2024 report.

The methodological approach of the study is based on a comparative statistical analysis of the TTDI indicators. The analysis is conducted in three stages. In the first stage, the overall TTDI scores and global rankings of the Balkans and Eastern European countries are examined in order to identify the relative position of the Western Balkan economies within the regional context. Particular attention is given to changes in ranking between 2019 and 2024, which provide insights into recent trends in tourism competitiveness.

In the second stage, a comparative analysis is conducted between the Balkans and Eastern Europe group and the leading European tourism economies. This comparison enables the identification of structural differences in tourism competitiveness, particularly in relation to the key TTDI dimensions such as infrastructure development, tourism resources and sustainability.

In the third stage, a more detailed pillar-level analysis is performed in order to identify the specific determinants shaping tourism competitiveness in the region. This analysis examines the performance of each country across the seventeen TTDI pillars, allowing the identification of key strengths and weaknesses in areas such as business environment, tourism policy, infrastructure development, tourism resources and sustainability.

The results of this methodological approach enable a comprehensive assessment of tourism competitiveness in the Western Balkans and provide insights into the structural factors influencing tourism development in the region. By combining regional benchmarking with pillar-level analysis, the study offers a clearer understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by emerging tourism destinations in Southeast Europe.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical results of the study are presented through a comparative examination of tourism competitiveness indicators for the countries of the Balkans and Eastern Europe. The analysis focuses on identifying differences in overall tourism competitiveness, as well as variations in the main TTDI dimensions across the region. Particular attention is given to the position of the Western Balkans in relation to other economies within the regional group.

Tourism Development Performance of Balkans and Eastern European Countries

Table 1 presents the TTDI scores and rankings for twelve countries belonging to the Balkans and Eastern Europe group. The results reveal a relatively wide range of competitiveness levels within this regional cluster. Overall index values range from 4.40 for Poland to 3.51 for Bosnia and Herzegovina, indicating notable differences in the structural conditions supporting tourism development across the region.

Table 1. The score of the Balkan and Eastern European countries according to TTDI dimensions (2024)

Country	Value	Rank	Change in position 2019-2024	Enabling environment	T&T policy and enabling conditions	Infrastructure and services	T&T resources	T&T sustainability
Poland	4.40	27	3	5.41	4.88	3.78	3.25	4.10
Hungary	4.27	37	5	5.49	4.92	3.78	2.25	4.54
Bulgaria	4.25	40	-1	5.40	4.82	3.48	2.25	3.90
Slovenia	4.22	42	-9	5.53	4.95	3.95	1.89	3.99
Romania	4.19	43	2	5.15	4.55	3.77	2.30	3.87
Slovakia	4.00	54	-2	5.45	4.51	3.12	1.95	4.02
Montenegro	3.96	60	-1	4.88	4.38	4.14	1.38	4.04
Albania	3.87	66	12	4.97	4.91	3.19	1.66	3.85
Serbia	3.86	68	3	5.24	4.39	3.12	1.67	4.50
North Macedonia	3.53	87	-5	4.79	4.17	2.61	1.54	4.50
Moldavia	3.53	88	1	4.88	4.15	2.40	1.28	4.38
B&H	3.51	90	1	4.58	4.18	2.65	1.55	3.93

Source: Word Economic Forum, Travel & Tourism Development Index Report 2024

Among the analysed countries, Poland occupies the leading position with a TTDI score of 4.40 and a global ranking of 27th place. Poland's relatively strong position reflects a balanced performance across all five TTDI dimensions, particularly in the enabling environment and policy conditions supporting tourism. Hungary and Bulgaria follow closely, ranking 37th and 40th respectively. These countries demonstrate similar overall scores (above 4.20), suggesting that Central-Eastern European EU member states maintain a relatively competitive tourism environment compared to other economies in the region.

A second group of countries includes Slovenia, Romania and Slovakia, whose TTDI scores range between 4.00 and 4.22. Although their overall rankings remain within the top 60 globally, Slovenia experienced the largest decline in ranking among the analysed countries, falling nine positions between 2019 and 2024. This decline may reflect slower progress in adapting tourism infrastructure or resource management compared to other destinations.

The Western Balkan economies are positioned in the lower half of the regional ranking. Among them, Montenegro records the highest TTDI score (3.96) and ranks 60th globally. This position reflects Montenegro's strong tourism orientation and the relative importance of tourism in its national economy. The country's strongest dimension is infrastructure and services, where it achieves the highest score among Western Balkan countries.

Albania shows the most significant improvement in ranking, advancing 12 positions between 2019 and 2024. This progress suggests increasing investments in tourism development, infrastructure modernization and improved tourism policies. Nevertheless, Albania's relatively low score in tourism resources (1.66) indicates that the country still faces challenges in effectively leveraging its natural and cultural attractions.

Serbia ranks slightly below Albania with a TTDI score of 3.86 and occupies the 68th position globally. The country performs relatively well in the enabling environment dimension (5.24), reflecting favourable business conditions and institutional frameworks supporting tourism development. However, Serbia's lower score in tourism resources highlights structural limitations related to the development and international promotion of tourism attractions.

The lowest rankings within the Western Balkan group are recorded by North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with TTDI scores slightly above 3.50. Both countries face similar challenges, particularly regarding infrastructure development and tourism resources. These limitations may reflect structural economic constraints and lower levels of investment in tourism infrastructure.

A deeper examination of the five TTDI dimensions reveals several important patterns. Across the Balkans and Eastern Europe group, the Enabling Environment dimension consistently receives the highest scores. Most countries achieve values above 5.0 in this dimension, indicating relatively favourable institutional conditions, labour markets and ICT readiness supporting tourism development.

The T&T Policy and Enabling Conditions dimension also demonstrates relatively strong performance across the region, with scores generally between 4.1 and 4.9. This suggests that most countries in the region have adopted policies aimed at facilitating tourism growth, including openness to international tourism markets and competitive pricing structures.

However, the Infrastructure and Services dimension displays more pronounced differences. While Slovenia and Montenegro record relatively high scores in this area, several countries – including North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – exhibit significantly lower values. These differences highlight uneven investment levels in transport infrastructure, tourism facilities and service capacity.

The T&T Resources dimension represents the weakest area for most countries in the region. Scores below 2.5 are common across the dataset, indicating limited international visibility of cultural and natural attractions or insufficient investment in their development and promotion. This finding suggests that although the region possesses considerable tourism potential, its resources are not fully utilized within the global tourism market.

Finally, the T&T Sustainability dimension shows relatively balanced performance across the region, with most countries achieving scores around 4.0. This reflects moderate progress in environmental protection, socioeconomic impact and sustainable tourism demand management.

Leading Tourism Economies in Europe

Table 2 presents the top twelve European countries according to the TTDI 2024 ranking. These countries represent the most developed tourism destinations in Europe and provide an important benchmark for evaluating the competitiveness of emerging tourism markets.

The results indicate a clear concentration of highly developed tourism economies in Western and Northern Europe. Spain occupies the leading position among European countries with a TTDI score of 5.18 and ranks second globally. Spain's leading position reflects its long-established tourism industry, well-developed infrastructure and globally recognized tourism resources.

Table 2. Top 12 European countries according to score and rank of the TTDI (2024)

Country	Value	Rank	Change in position 2019-2024	Enabling environment	T&T policy and enabling conditions	Infrastructure and services	T&T resources	T&T sustainability
Spain	5.18	2	0	5.57	4.78	5.48	5.47	4.33
France	5.07	4	2	5.71	4.29	5.28	5.57	4.09
Germany	5.00	6	-1	5.88	4.63	4.75	5.00	4.13
United Kingdom	4.96	7	-3	5.55	3.96	5.02	5.34	4.56
Italy	4.90	9	3	5.42	4.39	4.88	5.32	4.12
Switzerland	4.81	10	-2	6.15	3.93	5.45	3.23	4.41
Portugal	4.78	12	1	5.69	4.56	4.76	3.90	4.41
Austria	4.65	15	0	5.96	4.55	4.94	3.00	3.94
Netherlands	4.64	16	1	5.89	4.26	5.02	3.16	4.01
Denmark	4.63	17	-1	6.04	3.94	5.06	2.72	4.45
Sweden	4.57	19	0	5.92	4.27	4.34	3.14	4.30
Finland	4.52	20	-2	6.11	4.16	4.04	2.59	4.65

Source: Word Economic Forum, Travel & Tourism Development Index Report 2024

France follows closely with a score of 5.07, ranking fourth globally. France demonstrates strong performance particularly in tourism resources, where it achieves one of the highest scores in the dataset. Germany and the United Kingdom also appear among the top ten global tourism economies, reflecting their highly developed tourism infrastructure and strong business environments.

Countries such as Italy, Switzerland and Portugal form a second group of high-performing tourism destinations with scores between 4.78 and 4.90. These economies benefit from strong tourism brands, diversified tourism products and extensive international connectivity.

Northern European countries – including Denmark, Sweden and Finland – also rank among the top twenty globally. Their strong performance is primarily driven by high scores in the enabling environment dimension, reflecting stable institutional frameworks, advanced infrastructure and high levels of economic development.

In contrast to the Balkans and Eastern Europe group, the top European tourism economies demonstrate consistently high scores across all five TTDI dimensions. The most notable difference is observed in the Infrastructure and Services dimension, where scores exceed 5.0 for several countries. This indicates the presence of highly developed transport networks, tourism facilities and service systems capable of accommodating large numbers of international visitors.

Similarly, these countries achieve significantly higher scores in the T&T Resources dimension. Spain, France and Italy in particular possess extensive cultural heritage, globally recognized tourist attractions and strong destination branding strategies that enhance their tourism competitiveness.

The Enabling Environment dimension also shows very high scores across the top European economies, reflecting stable regulatory environments, strong labour markets and advanced digital infrastructure supporting tourism businesses.

Comparative Assessment of Tourism Competitiveness between Balkans and Eastern Europe and Leading European Destinations

A comparison between Tables 1 and 2 reveals a substantial competitiveness gap between the tourism sectors of the Balkans and Eastern Europe and those of the leading European tourism economies. The difference is evident both in overall TTDI scores and in the performance across individual dimensions.

The most significant disparity is observed in the Infrastructure and Services dimension. While top European tourism economies record scores above 5.0, most countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe achieve values between 2.6 and 4.1. This suggests that transport connectivity, tourism facilities and service quality remain key structural constraints for tourism development in the region.

Another important difference concerns the T&T Resources dimension. Leading tourism destinations such as Spain, France and Italy possess strong cultural and natural tourism assets that are internationally recognized and effectively promoted. In contrast, most countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe achieve relatively low scores in this dimension, indicating limited international visibility of their tourism attractions despite significant potential.

Nevertheless, the analysis also reveals certain areas of convergence. For instance, several countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe demonstrate competitive performance in the Enabling Environment dimension. This suggests that institutional frameworks and business conditions supporting tourism development are gradually improving in the region.

Overall, the results indicate that while Western Balkan countries have made notable progress in improving tourism competitiveness – particularly in terms of policy conditions and sustainability – they still face structural challenges related to infrastructure development and the effective utilization of tourism resources. Addressing these challenges will be essential for narrowing the competitiveness gap between emerging tourism destinations in the Balkans and the leading tourism economies of Europe.

Pillar-Level Analysis of Tourism Competitiveness in the Balkans and Eastern Europe

Table 3 presents a detailed overview of the scores of individual pillars within the TTDI for the countries of the Balkans and Eastern Europe in 2024. Unlike the previous tables that summarized overall scores and rankings, this table allows a deeper examination of the structural factors shaping tourism competitiveness in the region. By analysing individual pillars within each TTDI dimension, it becomes possible to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of tourism development across these countries and to highlight the specific position of the Western Balkan economies within the broader regional context.

Table 3. The score of pillars within TTDI for the Balkan and Eastern European countries (2024)

Dimension	Pillar	N. Macedonia	Bulgaria	Slovenia	Slovakia	Moldavia	Montenegro	Poland	Hungary	Romania	Albania	B&H	Serbia
Enabling environment	Business environment	3.93	4.53	4.79	4.68	3.56	3.86	4.46	4.65	4.49	4.55	3.31	4.19
	Safety and Security	5.98	5.73	6.50	5.85	5.80	6.12	5.98	6.26	5.70	5.98	6.00	6.10
	Health and hygiene	5.51	6.43	5.74	6.34	5.85	5.42	6.14	6.29	6.01	4.90	5.10	6.02
	HR and labour market	3.67	4.59	4.80	4.60	4.15	3.80	4.59	4.44	4.15	4.54	3.62	4.34
	ICT readiness	4.88	5.70	5.84	5.78	5.02	5.22	5.89	5.82	5.41	4.90	4.88	5.56
T&T policy and enabling cond.	Prioritization of T&T	3.43	4.52	5.67	4.77	3.50	4.28	4.73	5.36	3.70	5.19	2.82	3.72
	Openness to T&T	3.68	4.73	4.94	4.19	3.57	4.14	4.90	4.71	4.81	4.56	4.63	4.50
	Price competitiveness	5.41	5.22	4.23	4.57	5.38	4.73	5.03	4.68	5.13	5.00	5.10	4.95
Infrastructure and services	Air transport infrastructure	2.56	3.53	2.26	2.25	2.60	3.01	3.66	3.68	3.43	3.23	2.52	3.39
	Ground and port infrastruc.	2.72	3.54	4.72	4.26	2.95	3.35	4.71	4.94	3.50	3.33	2.57	3.51
	Tourist serv. and infrastruc.	2.56	3.38	4.87	2.84	1.64	6.07	2.95	2.71	4.37	3.01	2.85	2.45
T&T resources	Natural resources	1.84	2.82	2.53	2.20	1.36	1.77	2.84	1.97	2.58	2.17	1.74	1.59
	Cultural resources	1.53	2.10	1.62	1.88	1.25	1.22	3.30	2.20	2.17	1.29	1.59	1.72
	Non-leisure resources	1.26	1.84	1.53	1.77	1.24	1.14	3.60	2.57	2.16	1.52	1.33	1.72
T&T sustainability	Environmental sustainability	4.00	5.44	6.00	5.80	4.48	4.51	4.97	5.43	5.18	4.91	4.07	4.09
	T&T socioec. impact	4.04	4.80	3.65	3.56	3.99	5.35	3.75	3.71	5.32	3.27	4.50	4.31
	T&T demand sustainability	3.03	3.27	2.05	2.61	3.58	3.28	3.38	3.15	3.11	3.43	2.98	3.39

Source: Word Economic Forum, Travel & Tourism Development Index Report 2024

1) Enabling Environment

The enabling environment dimension captures the institutional and economic conditions that support tourism development, including the business environment, safety and security, health standards, labour market conditions and ICT readiness.

Across the region, the highest scores are generally recorded in the pillars of safety and security and health and hygiene, indicating that most countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe provide relatively stable and secure conditions for tourism activities. Slovenia stands

out with the highest safety score (6.50), followed closely by Hungary (6.26) and Serbia (6.10). Western Balkan countries also perform relatively well in this pillar, with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia all recording values close to or above 6.0. This suggests that safety conditions are not a major constraint for tourism development in the region.

Health and hygiene indicators also demonstrate relatively strong performance. Bulgaria (6.43), Slovakia (6.34) and Hungary (6.29) achieve the highest scores, reflecting well-developed healthcare systems and sanitary standards that support tourism activity. Serbia also performs well in this pillar (6.02), indicating that health infrastructure represents a relative strength for the country compared with several regional peers.

However, the business environment pillar reveals more significant disparities. Slovenia and Slovakia achieve the highest scores (4.79 and 4.68 respectively), while Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina record considerably lower values. Among the Western Balkan countries, Albania performs relatively well in this dimension (4.55), whereas Montenegro and North Macedonia show more modest scores. These differences suggest varying levels of regulatory efficiency and business climate conditions across the region.

Another important component of the enabling environment is the human resources and labour market pillar, where Slovenia (4.80) and Slovakia (4.60) achieve the strongest performance. In contrast, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina show lower scores, indicating challenges related to workforce skills, labour market flexibility and tourism education systems.

Finally, ICT readiness demonstrates relatively balanced performance across the region, with Poland (5.89), Slovenia (5.84) and Hungary (5.82) leading the ranking. Western Balkan countries show moderate values in this dimension, with Serbia (5.56) achieving one of the strongest performances among them. This suggests that digital infrastructure supporting tourism businesses is gradually improving in the region.

Overall, the enabling environment dimension appears to represent a relative strength for several countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, although disparities remain in business climate conditions and labour market development.

2) T&T Policy and Enabling Conditions

The second TTDI dimension examines policy frameworks that facilitate tourism development, including government prioritization of tourism, openness to international travel and price competitiveness.

Among the analysed countries, Slovenia records the highest score in the prioritization of travel and tourism pillar (5.67), indicating strong government commitment to tourism development. Hungary (5.36) and Albania (5.19) also demonstrate relatively high levels of policy prioritization. Albania's performance in this pillar is particularly noteworthy, suggesting that tourism has become an important strategic sector within the country's economic development agenda.

In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina records the lowest score (2.82), indicating limited policy emphasis on tourism development. North Macedonia and Moldova also display relatively modest values, suggesting that tourism may not yet receive sufficient strategic attention in these economies.

The openness to travel and tourism pillar shows relatively consistent scores across the region, with most countries achieving values between 4.1 and 4.9. Poland (4.90), Slovenia (4.94) and Romania (4.81) record the highest values, reflecting relatively liberal visa regimes and favourable policies facilitating international travel.

Price competitiveness represents one of the strongest dimensions for the countries of the region. Many countries achieve scores above 5.0, indicating relatively affordable tourism services and favourable exchange rate conditions for international visitors. North Macedonia (5.41), Moldova (5.38) and Bulgaria (5.22) record particularly strong performances in this pillar. Western Balkan countries also benefit from competitive pricing structures, which represent an important advantage in attracting international tourists.

3) Infrastructure and Services

Infrastructure represents one of the most critical determinants of tourism competitiveness. The results in Table 3 reveal significant disparities across the region in terms of transport networks and tourism facilities.

The air transport infrastructure pillar shows relatively low scores for most countries, indicating limited connectivity compared with major European tourism destinations. Poland (3.66) and Hungary (3.68) record the highest scores, reflecting the presence of larger international airports and more developed airline networks. Western Balkan countries generally achieve lower values, although Albania (3.23) and Serbia (3.39) perform somewhat better than North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The ground and port infrastructure pillar shows strong performance for Slovenia (4.72), Poland (4.71), Slovenia (4.72) and Hungary (4.94), reflecting well-developed transport networks and accessibility. Western Balkan countries again display lower scores, highlighting structural challenges related to road infrastructure and regional connectivity.

The most notable result within this dimension is observed in the tourist services and infrastructure pillar, where Montenegro achieves an exceptionally high score (6.07). This reflects the strong orientation of Montenegro's economy toward tourism and the presence of well-developed accommodation and tourism service facilities. Romania (4.37) and Slovenia (4.87) also perform relatively well, while Moldova records the lowest value (1.64), indicating limited tourism service capacity.

4) T&T Resources

Tourism resources represent a critical component of destination competitiveness. The results indicate that this dimension represents one of the main weaknesses of the region in terms of global tourism positioning.

In the natural resources pillar, Poland (2.84) and Bulgaria (2.82) record the highest scores, while Moldova and Serbia obtain the lowest values. Although several countries in the region possess significant natural attractions, these results suggest that their tourism potential is not fully developed or internationally recognized.

The cultural resources pillar highlights Poland as the clear leader (3.30), reflecting its extensive cultural heritage and well-developed tourism promotion strategies. Other countries in the region achieve relatively modest scores, suggesting that cultural tourism assets are not yet fully integrated into tourism development strategies.

Similarly, the non-leisure resources pillar, which includes factors such as business travel and conference infrastructure, shows the strongest performance for Poland (3.60) and Hungary (2.57). Western Balkan countries record relatively low values, indicating limited development of business tourism and MICE sectors.

5) T&T Sustainability

The final TTDI dimension evaluates the sustainability of tourism development across environmental, socioeconomic and demand-related indicators.

In the environmental sustainability pillar, Slovenia stands out with the highest score (6.00), reflecting strong environmental policies and effective resource management. Slovakia (5.80), Bulgaria (5.44) and Hungary (5.43) also achieve high values. Western Balkan countries record moderate scores, with Montenegro and Albania performing relatively well compared to the regional average.

The tourism socioeconomic impact pillar reveals interesting differences. Montenegro (5.35) and Romania (5.32) achieve the highest scores, reflecting the significant contribution of tourism to their national economies. Bosnia and Herzegovina also performs relatively well in this dimension, indicating the growing economic importance of tourism.

Finally, the tourism demand sustainability pillar shows generally lower scores across the region, suggesting that tourism demand management and diversification remain important challenges for many destinations.

The pillar-level analysis highlights several structural characteristics of tourism competitiveness in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. While many countries demonstrate relatively favourable enabling environments and competitive pricing structures, significant disparities remain in terms of infrastructure development and tourism resources.

Western Balkan countries show moderate performance across most pillars but demonstrate particular strengths in safety conditions, price competitiveness and tourism's socioeconomic contribution. However, limited infrastructure capacity and relatively low scores in tourism resources suggest that further investment and strategic development will be necessary to strengthen their position within the European tourism market.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined tourism competitiveness and economic performance in the Western Balkans within the broader context of the Balkans and Eastern Europe region using the TTDI framework. By analysing overall index scores, individual TTDI dimensions, and pillar-level indicators, the research provided a comparative assessment of tourism development conditions across the region and benchmarked them against the leading European tourism economies.

The results of the analysis reveal a clear disparity between the tourism competitiveness of Western Balkan countries and that of the most developed European tourism destinations. While countries such as Spain, France, Germany and Italy consistently achieve high TTDI scores due to advanced infrastructure, strong tourism resources and highly developed service systems, the countries of the Balkans and Eastern Europe demonstrate more moderate levels of competitiveness. Within this regional group, Central and Eastern European EU member states, including Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria, occupy higher positions in the ranking, reflecting stronger institutional environments and more developed tourism infrastructure.

The Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia – are positioned in the lower half of the regional ranking. Nevertheless, the analysis also highlights certain positive trends. Albania shows the most significant improvement in ranking over the observed period, indicating growing investments in tourism development and increasing recognition of tourism as a strategic economic sector. Montenegro maintains the strongest tourism orientation among the Western Balkan economies, particularly due to its relatively well-developed tourism services infrastructure and the significant contribution of tourism to its national economy. Serbia demonstrates favourable institutional

and business conditions supporting tourism development, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia face more pronounced structural challenges related to infrastructure development and tourism resource utilization.

The pillar-level analysis further reveals several structural characteristics of tourism competitiveness in the region. The enabling environment dimension represents one of the strongest areas for many countries, particularly in terms of safety, health standards and ICT readiness. Price competitiveness also emerges as an important advantage for the Western Balkan countries, providing favourable conditions for attracting international visitors.

However, the results also highlight key structural limitations that constrain tourism competitiveness in the region. In particular, the infrastructure and services dimension remains one of the most significant challenges, as transport connectivity and tourism facilities in many countries still lag behind those of the leading European destinations. In addition, the relatively low scores recorded in the tourism resources dimension indicate that the natural and cultural assets of the region are not yet fully developed or internationally promoted.

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that strengthening tourism competitiveness in the Western Balkans will require a multidimensional approach. Priority areas include further investment in transport infrastructure, improved destination management and stronger international promotion of cultural and natural tourism resources. In addition, the development of tourism-related human capital and the expansion of tourism service capacity could play an important role in enhancing the region's position in the global tourism market.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that while Western Balkan countries have made progress in improving their tourism competitiveness, significant opportunities remain for further development. By addressing existing structural limitations and leveraging their relatively strong enabling environments and competitive pricing structures, these countries may enhance their tourism performance and gradually narrow the competitiveness gap with the leading tourism economies of Europe.

Future research could expand this analysis by incorporating additional economic indicators, examining tourism demand trends, or applying econometric models to explore the relationship between tourism competitiveness and broader economic development in the Western Balkans. Such approaches would contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of tourism as a driver of regional economic growth and development.

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MACROECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF BULGARIA'S TOURISM SECTOR: AN ARDL ANALYSIS

Erdoğan Kotil[1], Fatih Konur[2]

Abstract: *This study examines the macroeconomic determinants of the Bulgarian tourism sector using data from the period 1995-2024 and employing the ARDL bounds test approach. Bulgaria hosted an average of 5.74 million international tourists between 2004 and 2023, representing an 83% increase compared to the previous fifteen years. EU membership, the development of transportation infrastructure, and increased tourism investments played a decisive role in this growth.*

According to the ADF unit root test results, the variables are not integrated at the I(2) level, making the ARDL model applicable. The bounds test F statistic (3.871) indicates the presence of cointegration at the 5% and 10% significance levels. The error correction coefficient (ECT = −0.8368) reveals that short-term imbalances are corrected by approximately 83.7% annually.

When long-term coefficients are examined, it is seen that per capita income has a negative effect on tourism revenues; while the real effective exchange rate and foreign trade volume have a positive and statistically significant effect. The effect of the consumer price index was found to be insignificant. The increase in trade volume strongly supports tourism, reflecting the contribution of EU integration and developing infrastructure to the sector.

Key words: *Tourism demand, ARDL bounds test, Cointegration, Exchange rate, Trade openness*

INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector is a vital service industry that supports growth in many countries and increases their foreign exchange earnings. Countries attract international tourists based on various characteristics. Bulgaria, too, possesses significant tourism potential thanks to its natural beauty, cultural heritage, and geographical location. Since the early 2000s, Bulgaria has experienced a significant increase in both the number of tourists and tourism revenues. Bulgaria has made significant progress in the tourism sector, especially in the last twenty years. The number of tourists visiting the country reached an average of 5.74 million between 2004 and 2023. This number corresponds to 85% of the country's population. The average number of tourists in the previous fifteen years was 3.13 million. There has been an 83% increase in the average number of tourists.

There are several reasons for these developments in the tourism sector. Bulgaria's integration into the European tourism market, improvements in transportation infrastructure, and increased tourism investments have played a significant role in this growth. Bulgaria's accession to the European Union in 2007 contributed to an increase in the number of international tourists visiting the country. Easier border crossings, improved investment conditions, and the development of tourism infrastructure following EU membership were among the factors supporting the sector's growth.

The tourism sector is also affected by various macroeconomic factors. Therefore, examining macroeconomic determinants is crucial for the sustainable development of the tourism sector.

Macroeconomic variables are fundamental indicators reflecting a country's overall

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economic structure. Indicators such as gross domestic product, exchange rate, inflation rate, unemployment level, and trade openness are considered macroeconomic variables. These variables can directly or indirectly affect tourism demand. The level of economic growth, in particular, is closely related to investments in tourism infrastructure. Furthermore, exchange rate and inflation changes are significant determinants of tourism demand as they affect tourists' travel costs. Relationships established between countries through foreign trade have a positive impact on reciprocal visits.

Examining the macroeconomic determinants of the tourism sector is crucial not only for understanding tourism demand but also for formulating economic policies. Such analyses help policymakers develop more effective strategies by revealing which economic factors the tourism sector is most sensitive to. This study will use tourism revenue, per capita income, exchange rate, inflation, and foreign trade volume as variables for the analysis of Bulgarian tourism. The analysis was conducted using the ARDL model with data from the last twenty five years.

LITERATURE

Meşter et al. (2023) investigated the relationship between the international tourism development index, GDP per capita, CO2 emissions, trade openness index, and energy intensity index in the EU 27 during the period 1995-2019. Using a panel autoregressive distributed lag (ARDL) approach, the analysis revealed that the trade deficit negatively impacted tourism development in Bulgaria, while a significant correlation was found between GDP and tourism development in Bulgaria.

According to Boycheva (2017) and Neuburger (2017), the tourism sector plays a key role as a driving force in the Bulgarian economy. The authors state that numerous studies have demonstrated the quantitative results of this. Tourism has shown significant growth, particularly since 2006.

Chou analyzed the causal relationship between economic growth and tourism during the period 1988-2011 using data for EU transit countries. According to the results, no causal relationship was found in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia.

Aslan (2014) examined the relationship between tourism development and economic growth in Mediterranean countries using panel Granger causality tests for the period 1995-2010. The study found a unidirectional causality from economic growth to tourism development for Spain, Italy, Tunisia, Cyprus, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Greece. The tourism-led growth hypothesis is supported in these seven countries.

Bădulescu et al. (2020) conducted ARDL and Granger-casality tests on a sample of 11 countries during the period 1995-2015. The variables used in the study were economic growth, number of international tourists, tourism revenues, and GDP per capita. The results showed that causality between tourism and economic growth was found for the Czech Republic, Romania, and Slovakia; for Lithuania, causality between tourism and economic growth was confirmed when international tourist arrivals were used; and for Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania, causality was also found when international tourism revenues were used.

Tung (2021) aims to examine the tourism-driven growth hypothesis for some transition countries, including Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, and Vietnam. Annual data from 1995-2019 were used in the research. The Johansen-Fisher test and OLS estimation were applied in the analysis. The study found the existence of long-term cointegration relationships between tourism revenues and economic growth. The long-term coefficients of the tourism variables were positive and significant; this indicates that the tourism-driven growth hypothesis is valid in these transition countries.

MODEL AND DATA SET

Tourism demand for a country is a dynamic process. According to Song, Wong, and Chon (2003), tourists make different decisions about destination choices over time. Therefore, this study uses the Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) approach recommended by Pesaran, Shin, and Smith (2001). This model will reflect dynamic characteristics. Accordingly, the international tourism demand forecast for Bulgaria using the ARDL model can be written as follows:

$$lTR_{jt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1.lTR_{j,t-1} + \beta_2.lGDP_{j,t} + \beta_3.lGDP_{j,t-1} + \beta_4.lER_{j,t} + \beta_5.lER_{j,t-1} + \beta_6.lCPI_{j,t} + \beta_7.lCPI_{j,t-1} + \beta_8.lPEXjt + \beta_9.lEX_{j,t-1} + \varepsilon_{j,t}$$

Here, TR represents income as an indicator of tourism demand, GDP represents gross domestic product per capita, ER represents the exchange rate, CPI represents the consumer price index, and EX represents openness to the world. All variables are written logarithmically.

Here, βs represent long-term dynamic coefficients and t–1 represents the previous period. Such dynamic models have several advantages. Firstly, the ARDL model does not require the data series of variables to be integrated of the same order (Pesaran, 1997). However, the presence of I (2) makes the ARDL used unsuitable for such series (Pesaran, 1996, 1997). Secondly, the model is not sensitive to sample size and can be used in small samples. Thirdly, even when the variables are endogenous, the bounds test approach provides long-term estimates and valid t-statistics (Pesaran et al., 2001), (Alhassan & Fiador, 2014).

To see if the series are not integrated in degree I(2), the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test will be used. After ensuring the stationarity of all variables, the ARDL model will be used to estimate the long-term and short-term relationship.

This study uses time series data for Bulgaria from 1995 to 2024. Tourism revenue was used as an indicator of international tourism demand. Explanatory variables included GDP per capita (RGPPC), inflation (CPI), exchange rate (ER), and foreign trade volume (EX). Data were obtained from World Bank Development Indicators and Un Tourism.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the ADF unit root test results, the series of variables are not integrated at the I(2) level. The degree of integration of the series is given in Table 1. Due to the appropriate degree of integration, the ARDL bounds test approach can be used to examine the long-term relationship between Bulgarian tourism demand and explanatory variables. Serial correlation, heteroskedasticity, normal distribution, and basic diagnostic tests were performed in the analysis.

Table 1. Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) Unit Root Test Results

Variable	ADF Test Statistic		Test Critical Values			Integration Order
	t-Statistic	Prob.*	1% level	5% level	10% level	
LGDP_PC	-3.4436	0.0188	-3.7241	-2.9862	-2.6326	**I(1)**
LGDP_PC(t-1)	-3.3544	0.0234	-3.7379	-2.9919	-2.6355	**I(1)**
LCP	-3.2499	0.0283	-3.7115	-2.9810	-2.6299	**I(0)**
LCP(t-1)	-2.9538	0.0534	-3.7241	-2.9862	-2.6326	**I(0)**
LREER	-3.1595	0.0349	-3.7241	-2.9862	-2.6326	**I(1)**
LREER(t-1)	-2.8825	0.0622	-3.7379	-2.9919	-2.6355	**I(1)**
LTR	-4.9088	0.0006	-3.7241	-2.9862	-2.6326	**I(1)**
LTR(t-1)	-4.7675	0.0009	-3.7379	-2.9919	-2.6355	**I(1)**
LEX	-4.3803	0.0103	-4.3943	-3.6122	-3.2431	**I(1)**
LEX(t-1)	-4.3036	0.0127	-4.4163	-3.6220	-3.2486	**I(1)**

According to the analysis performed by Narayan (2005), the bounds test F ratio was found to be 3.871. Accordingly, at the critical values (Table 2), it remains below the lower limit of I(0) at the 1% significance level. However, the F value is larger at 5% and 10%. Therefore, a statistically significant long-term cointegration relationship has been determined between GDP per capita and REER, Inflation, Tourism Revenues and Trade Volume in Bulgaria for the period 1998-2024.

Table 2. ARDL Bounds Test Results

Significance	I(0) Lower	I(1) Upper	Result
%10	2.045	3.035	F=3.871 > 3.035 → Cointegration exist
%5	2.545	3.785	F=3.871 > 3.785 → Cointegration exist
%1	3.75	5.285	F=3.871 → Cointegration doesn't exist (3.75 < F < 5.285)

The ECT coefficient (ρ) was found to be −0.8368 | SE = 0.1959 | t = −4.271 | p = 0.0005 ***. Since ECT is negative (−0.8368) and significant (1%), the long-term balance mechanism is working. Approximately 83.7% of the imbalance is corrected each year.

Table 3. Long-Term Coefficients

Variable	LR Coefficient	t-ist.	p-value	Comment
LGDP_PC	−3.2898	−2.623	0.018 **	Negative and significant at %5
LREER	5.5429	2.256	0.038 **	Pozitive and significant at %5
LCPI	−0.0376	−0.619	0.544	Not significant
LEX	2.2523	2.659	0.017 **	Pozitive and significant at %5

In the long run, the impact of per capita income on tourism revenues is negative. This relationship may be due to the fact that domestic income growth creates increased demand for domestic goods and services, leading to tourism exclusion.

Rising real exchange rates increase tourism revenues in the long run. Higher quality services may be compensating for rising prices in Bulgaria. As a result, tourism demand is increasing despite rising prices.

Consumer inflation has been statistically insignificant.

Increased trade volume strongly supports tourism revenues in the long run. This can be explained by integration into the European Union, developing transportation and tourism infrastructure, cultural and sporting activities, and increased business visits.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the macroeconomic determinants of the Bulgarian tourism sector for the period 1995-2024 within the framework of the ARDL model. The findings confirm the existence of a long-term cointegration relationship between tourism revenues and per capita income, real effective exchange rate, inflation, and foreign trade volume.

When long-term coefficients are evaluated, it is seen that an increase in per capita income has a negative impact on tourism revenues. This finding can be interpreted as the increase in domestic income drawing resources from tourism by raising the demand for domestic goods and services. The rise in the real effective exchange rate, on the other hand, positively affects tourism revenues; it is assessed that the high-quality services offered by Bulgaria compensate for price increases, thus maintaining the vitality of tourism demand. The effect of inflation on tourism revenues was found to be statistically insignificant, indicating that changes in the price level do not significantly affect tourism preferences in the short term. The expansion of foreign trade volume strongly supports tourism revenues. This result reflects the

contribution of deepening economic integration with EU membership, developing transportation infrastructure, and increased business travel to the sector.

The fact that the error correction mechanism operates at approximately 83.7% annually demonstrates that Bulgarian tourism recovers relatively quickly from short-term shocks and effectively converges to long-term equilibrium.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that policymakers prioritize strategies aimed at developing foreign trade and deepening international economic integration. Furthermore, maintaining exchange rate stability and continuing investments in tourism infrastructure will significantly contribute to the long-term growth of the sector. Future research that includes structural factors such as digitalization, sustainable tourism, and climate change in the model will provide a basis for obtaining more comprehensive insights into the Bulgarian tourism sector.

In conclusion, the tourism sector in Bulgaria has shown significant growth over the last twenty years, both in terms of tourist numbers and economic contribution. Membership of the European Union, increased investments, and developing tourism infrastructure are among the key determinants of this growth. However, external factors such as global crises and pandemics have occasionally had negative impacts on the sector. In the future, increasing tourism diversification and implementing sustainable tourism policies will be crucial for the development of Bulgarian tourism.

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GOVERNING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM THROUGH SOFT LAW: UN TOURISM'S INSTITUTIONAL ROLE AND THE "CINQUE TERRE" MODEL

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ABSTRACT: *This paper analyses UN Tourism's role in promoting sustainable national tourism, with particular emphasis on governance and strategic planning tools to strengthen destination resilience and inclusiveness. The World Tourism Organisation, officially renamed UN Tourism in 2024, is recognised as the leading international body in the sector. It provides guidelines, regulatory frameworks, monitoring systems, and tools to guide Member States' tourism policies, consistent with the principles of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. The analysis highlights the structural challenges facing domestic tourism, including climate change, environmental crises, inefficient management of tourist flows, and governance deficits. These critical issues can be addressed through soft law instruments, multilevel coordination mechanisms, and operational guidelines, thereby enabling the sector to become a driver of responsible, inclusive, and innovative growth. The research underscores the connection between UN Tourism's strategic priorities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with particular reference to sustainable economic growth, protection of natural resources, and inclusive employment. The analysis highlights the Organisation's indirect regulatory function, which promotes the harmonisation of national policies with international sustainability principles, without infringing upon the legislative sovereignty of States. Finally, the paper aims to stimulate academic debate on the role of international environmental law in the tourism sector and the effectiveness of multilevel governance tools. A case study of sustainable tourism management that integrates circular economy principles is presented, demonstrating how to reconcile economic development, environmental protection, and social inclusion by transforming guidelines and strategies into concrete operational actions.*

KEYWORDS: *International environmental law, Environmental sustainability, Agenda 2030, Climate change, Sustainability guidelines, Sustainable development.*

INTRODUCTION

The international body responsible for tourism is the World Tourism Organisation, recognised by the United Nations as a Specialised Agency in 2004 (UNGA, 2003; UNWTO, 2003). It defines tourism as the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business, and other purposes (UNWTO, 2020a). In 2024, the Organisation's General Assembly renamed UNWTO to UN Tourism (UN Tourism, 2024). Since 2005, as part of international sustainability initiatives, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organisation have been calling on Member States to integrate the principles of sustainable development into their tourism strategies (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). International environmental law provides tools integrated into the normative framework of sustainability. In this perspective, the concept of sustainable development, as outlined in the 1987 Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, identifies development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

The role of sustainable tourism was further highlighted on the occasion of World Tourism Day 2025, held in Malaysia, which underscored tourism as an agent of positive change (UN Tourism, 2025). The final document of the event emphasised the need for the sector's transformation to be driven by effective governance and participatory strategic planning. However, the national tourism sector presents several structural challenges, including climate

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change, environmental crises, inadequate land-use planning, and inefficient management of tourist flows. Regulatory tools, such as sustainability guidelines and principles, enable planning and management of the tourism sector in a manner consistent with environmental protection, destination resilience, and the participation of local stakeholders. They promote effective governance and strategic planning geared toward sustainability and are fully implemented across UN Tourism's institutional functions and strategic priorities, as illustrated in the following chapters.

2. GAPS IN THE INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND INTERNATIONAL TOURISM

2.1 Context and mandate of the IPCC

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the leading international scientific body for assessing climate change and its impacts on ecosystems and society. It was established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO, n.d.) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 1987) as a joint subsidiary body. The United Nations General Assembly, with Resolution 43/53 of December 6 1988, formally approved the action of the WMO and UNEP in jointly establishing the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (UNGA, 1988). The Panel's mandate includes the preparation of coordinated scientific assessments among Member States, with the formal support of WMO and UNEP, through a Memorandum of Understanding (IPCC, 1989). These assessments provide States with information on the extent of climate change, its impacts, and possible response strategies.

Since 1990, the IPCC has produced six assessment reports. The Sixth Assessment Report was completed in 2023 (IPCC, 2023a). Unlike previous reports, which gave greater attention to the tourism sector, the Sixth Assessment Report offers a more limited analysis of the specific impacts of climate change on tourism and of local adaptation and mitigation strategies (Taylor et al., 2023). This indicates a gap in the scientific literature and in the States' capacity to integrate the IPCC's evidence into national tourism policies fully.

2.2 International literature on climate change and tourism

The scientific literature shows that, although the IPCC produces detailed assessments of climate change and possible response strategies, this information is not fully integrated into national tourism policies (Taylor et al., 2023). This deficit creates a knowledge and practice gap, highlighting the need for further research on how scientific evidence can be translated into sustainable operational strategies for the tourism sector (Gössling et al., 2022). Despite growing attention to climate change, some regions, such as South America, the Middle East, and South Asia, remain under-researched (Becken & Clapcott, 2011). Furthermore, few studies examine the effectiveness of adaptation and mitigation strategies implemented at the destination level, making it difficult to translate scientific knowledge into concrete actions for sustainable tourism management (Scott & Gössling, 2022). This study aims to fill this gap by analysing the available evidence on the impact of climate change on tourism and integrating it into national policies and sustainable management of the tourism sector (Becken & Clapcott, 2011).

3. THE INSTITUTIONAL ROLE OF THE WORLD TOURISM ORGANIZATION: ORIGINS AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) was established as an intergovernmental body under the Statute adopted on September 27 1970, which entered into force in 1975 (WTO, 1970a). According to Chapter 3 of the Statute, the main purpose is to promote the development of tourism as a means of contributing to economic growth, peace, and prosperity, and to extend

this promotion to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (WTO, 1970b). The Organisation became a Specialised Agency of the United Nations following a General Assembly resolution in 2004 (UNGA, 2003; UNWTO, 2003). In 2024, the Assembly renamed the Organisation to UN Tourism, marking a new era for the global sector (UN Tourism, 2024).

The Agency brings together 160 Member States, 6 Associate Members, and over 500 Affiliates, promoting tourism as a lever for economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability (UNWTO, 2020a). The UN Tourism's programmed action is structured into five strategic priorities: innovation and digital transformation; strengthening sector capacity through entrepreneurial investments; job creation and training programs; travel resilience and safety; and protecting cultural and natural heritage with support for local communities (UN Tourism, n.d.-a). These priorities align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda and translate into concrete governance and strategic planning tools, as will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

4. GOVERNANCE OF NATIONAL TOURISM: FUNCTIONS AND TOOLS

To address the structural challenges of national tourism, UN Tourism provides governance and strategic planning tools to guide Member States' policies. These tools include regulatory frameworks, sustainability guidelines, monitoring systems, coordination mechanisms, and emergency management procedures. These instruments enable Member States to plan interventions, evaluate outcomes, and address critical issues, thereby promoting sustainable, resilient, and inclusive tourism policies. On the occasion of World Tourism Day 2025, held in Melaka, Malaysia, on the theme of Tourism and Sustainable Transformations, UN Tourism highlighted that effective governance is an indispensable condition for implementing sustainability policies in the sector (UN Tourism, 2025).

From a legal perspective, these tools are not binding and constitute international soft law (Heinrich, 2025). The latter includes acts and instruments that, while not generating coercive obligations, serve to direct, coordinate, and progressively harmonise State conduct. This form of flexible regulation, particularly effective in sectors with high levels of interdependence and technical cooperation, promotes regulatory convergence without affecting State sovereignty. In this context, sustainability guidelines and standards constitute the first operational level of governance, offering reference criteria for the formulation of national tourism policies (UNWTO, 2020a).

This framework is based on monitoring systems and coordination mechanisms to ensure the implementation and verification of objectives, thereby strengthening the multilevel dimension of tourism governance at the national and global levels. Alongside the tools provided by UN Tourism, the 2030 Agenda also offers guidelines and objectives that States can adapt to plan sustainable tourism policies, promoting the integration of soft law, local governance, and international sustainability principles (UNGA, 2015).

5. THE STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES OF NATIONAL TOURISM AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNANCE TOOLS

Domestic tourism is subject to a series of structural criticalities resulting from environmental, social, economic, and health factors that test the sustainability, resilience, and inclusiveness of destinations. To address these challenges, UN Tourism provides Member States with comprehensive governance tools and planning strategies to promote sustainable, resilient, and inclusive tourism policies (UN Tourism, n.d.-a).

Tourist destinations are always vulnerable to extreme climate events. To address these phenomena, the Organisation proposes sustainability guidelines and regulatory frameworks to

responsibly manage natural resources and strengthen local community resilience (UN Tourism, n.d.-b). These tools are reflected in targeted interventions, such as planning safe tourist routes in flood-prone areas and adopting environmental standards for coastal infrastructure.

Managing tourist flows is an additional challenge, requiring strategies to prevent overcrowding, reduce pressure on infrastructure, and ensure sustainable access to tourist sites. Likewise, health emergencies and global crises impact the stability of tourist communities. Crisis management procedures and operational guidelines developed by UN Tourism support destinations in developing resilience plans, adopting safety protocols, and implementing timely communication tools.

Economic and social challenges, such as market instability, seasonal employment, and territorial disparities, are also addressed through incentives, training programs, and regulatory instruments that foster participation and inclusion (UN Tourism, 2024). In this context, governance and strategic planning tools act as guidance and coordination mechanisms, translating international objectives into coherent administrative practices. The concrete adoption of these tools demonstrates that it is possible to integrate environmental sustainability, social equity, and resilience into national tourism management while simultaneously promoting best practices and stimulating academic debate.

In conclusion, strengthening governance tools is an essential condition for consolidating sustainability, resilience, and cohesion in tourism policies (UN Tourism, n.d.-c). The next chapter will illustrate how the UN Tourism guidelines and governance tools are being applied operationally by Member States in developing sustainable tourism.

6. DOMESTIC TOURISM: IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABLE TOURIST DESTINATIONS

6.1 Impacts of climate change on domestic tourism

Among the various challenges already highlighted in previous chapters, the impact of anthropogenic climate change on domestic tourism is particularly significant. As highlighted in the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023b), these impacts are widespread, intensifying, and scientifically confirmed. Among the most significant consequences are the increased frequency and intensity of extreme events, such as heatwaves, floods, forest fires, coastal erosion, and melting glaciers.

Climate change has already caused significant losses to natural ecosystems and local communities, directly impacting visitor safety, the use of natural and cultural resources, and the resilience of local tourism-based economies. It constitutes a cross-cutting challenge that affects the stability of tourist flows and the sustainability of territorial systems. To address these critical issues, it is necessary to implement adaptation tools and strategic governance mechanisms that integrate environmental, social, and economic criteria into tourism policies. From this perspective, UN Tourism promotes operational guidelines and reference frameworks consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals, encouraging alignment between national policies and international commitments.

6.2 The case of the "Cinque Terre" national park: a sustainable tourism destination

After outlining the main critical issues characterising national tourism within the framework of sustainability policies, a concrete application case is presented. The Cinque Terre National Park is a significant example of integrating local governance with international principles, establishing itself as a sustainable tourism destination at the national level. Located along the Riviera di Levante in Liguria and recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site

(UNESCO, n.d.), it offers a management model aimed at protecting the cultural landscape and sustainably regulating tourism flows. It comprises five coastal municipalities and protected areas of high environmental fragility.

The Cinque Terre Card represents the main tool for putting the principles of the circular economy and the objectives of the environmental policy into practice (Parco Nazionale delle Cinque Terre, n.d.-c). The latter, approved by the Board of Directors in 2020, aims to preserve the territory for the benefit of present and future generations. The programmatic direction is implemented through specific operational guidelines, which constitute concrete tools for implementing the principle of sustainable development, integrating environmental protection, safeguarding the cultural landscape, and responsible management of tourist flows (Parco Nazionale delle Cinque Terre, n.d.-b).

The Park's environmental governance approach focuses on the conservation of biodiversity and the cultural landscape, the promotion of scientific research, and the valorisation of local products. At the heart of the strategy are seven hiking trails that showcase the territory's diverse essences and the dialogue between the natural landscape, terraces, ancient knowledge, and new forms of attraction linked to the outdoor experience. The Card integrates sustainable mobility, the use of trails and tourist services, and reinvests proceeds in land maintenance, biodiversity protection, and the valorisation of cultural heritage (Parco Nazionale delle Cinque Terre, n.d.-a). In this way, tourism generates a virtuous circle of conservation, safety, and shared development: nature welcomes, tourism passes through with respect, and the value produced returns to the community.

From the implementation practices of the regenerative model of the Cinque Terre National Park, several significant goals of the 2030 Agenda are highlighted, including:

- *SDG 8***:** Decent work and economic growth, promoting local communities and tourism-related activities (UNGA, 2015a).
- *SDG 11***:** Sustainable cities and communities, with sustainable governance of natural and cultural heritage and regulated access to hiking trails and park sites (UNGA, 2015b).
- *SDG 15***:** Life on land, actively protecting habitats and biodiversity, integrating environmental conservation, trail maintenance, and sustainable development of resident communities (UNGA, 2015c).

The Park's model demonstrates that, through local governance tools consistent with the international regulatory framework, it is possible to integrate environmental conservation, economic development, and social inclusion, creating a regenerative tourism practice well-suited to addressing the challenges posed by climate change.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this paper returns to its original objective: to stimulate academic debate on the challenges facing national tourism and on research findings related to the promotion and development of sustainable tourism destinations. This paper has highlighted how UN Tourism is a central player in promoting sustainable national tourism. It provides governance tools, guidelines, and regulatory frameworks to strengthen the resilience, inclusiveness, and environmental sustainability of destinations.

Analysis of the chapters has shown how the sector's structural challenges can be addressed through soft law instruments, multilevel monitoring systems, and operational strategies adaptable to different national contexts. In this context, the paper highlights the indirect regulatory function of UN Tourism, which allows Member States to harmonise their policies with international sustainability principles without imposing coercive constraints.

In this regard, the case of the Cinque Terre National Park is presented, demonstrating how a tourist destination can be managed in accordance with the principles of the circular economy: nature welcomes, tourism passes through with respect, and the value produced returns to the community.

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TOURISM, LANDSCAPE COMMODIFICATION AND GEOCONSERVATION: THE TANDIL CASE, ARGENTINA

Gonzalo Schneider[1], Jorge Lapena[2]

ABSTRACT: *From a combined analytical approach, this research examines the relationship between tourism and landscape commodification in the Sierras de Tandil (provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina), a geological–geomorphological enclave distinguished by Precambrian outcrops and singular geoforms that express territorial identities, attract visitors from diverse parts of the world, and exhibit a proliferation of unsustainable land uses. Within this framework, the study aims to analyze how current tourism dynamics reconfigure the social production of the serrano landscape and generate tensions between the resident community and governmental management characterized by ineffective enforcement of sustainability-oriented legislation. Methodologically, normative frameworks were reassessed in relation to surveys conducted within the Protected Landscape defined as the spatial unit of analysis, followed by semi-structured interviews with representative stakeholders from competing arenas (including university experts acting in an advisory capacity), as well as a stratified sampling survey administered to residents. The results reveal divergences between regulatory frameworks and institutional sustainability discourses in contrast with prevailing economic–environmental dynamics in the serrano space and the degree of socio-territorial inclusion. The construction boom unrelated to socio-housing demands, together with land uses dominated by large-scale investments and real estate ventures that privatize the serrano space and transform the natural substrate, constitutes a transgression of existing regulations. Consequently, connections with territorial heritage are restricted, while local environmental problems emerge. These findings underscore the need to strengthen the binding advisory role of the university, reinforce regulatory compliance, and promote geotourism as a pathway toward geoconservation and the reduction of eco-mercantile practices.*

KEYWORDS: *Sierras de Tandil; Protected Landscape; Geoconservation; Real Estate Development; Socio-spatial Exclusion.*

INTRODUCTION

The Sistema Serrano de Tandilia is located in the central-eastern sector of Buenos Aires province (Argentina), in the southeastern portion of the Región Pampeana, and constitutes—together with Ventania—the so-called "positivo bonaerense," a relief formation that interrupts the Pampean plain dominated by sediments and extensive Quaternary plains. Within the Sierras Septentrionales Bonaerenses, it extends across approximately 12,300 km², from Blanca Grande (at the boundaries of the districts of Olavarría and Bolívar) to Cabo Corrientes on the urban periphery of Mar del Plata. The width of the system varies, reaching a maximum of approximately 60 km between Tandil and Barker, while its southern foothills even submerge beneath the continental shelf of the Mar Argentino. This relief does not constitute a strict orographic barrier, as its maximum elevation reaches 524 m a.s.l. (Cingolani, 2008). From a morphostructural perspective, the system presents internal differences between crystalline or Precambrian serrano groups—dominated by intrusive rocks—and tabular or Paleozoic sedimentary sections, separated by large valleys and peneplain areas (Cingolani, 2008). Geomorphologically, these differentiated sectors of the serrano system display structural geoforms such as domes and tabular plateaus.

In the central area of the crystalline subregion of the Sistema Serrano de Tandilia, within which the Sierras de Tandil are situated as the macro-scale study area, rounded hills with gentle

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slopes predominate, associated with exposures of the igneous or metamorphic crystalline basement dated between 2,100 and 2,300 million years (Chernicoff et al., 2016), constituting the oldest geological unit in Argentina and among the oldest in the region. By contrast, younger outcrops—formed between 700 and 900 million years ago—display tabular morphologies, with plateau-like surfaces generated by sedimentary stratification processes (Cingolani, 2008). This system concentrates numerous sites of geological interest expressed through relics of deformed rocks, quarrying operations, and exposures of the ancient basement together with its sedimentary cover. Such sites constitute geological-paleontological records that, due to their cultural and educational value, should be preserved as heritage of humanity (Cingolani, 2008). Within this regional framework, the preceding characterization refers to the serrano macro-scale, whereas subsequent analysis focuses on the peri-urban Protected Landscape adjacent to the city of Tandil, defined as the micro-scale study area because of its direct relationship with the territorial issues addressed.

Figure 1. Geoforms of the Sistema Serrano de Tandilia.
Source: Author's fieldwork (2025).

However, the territorial specificity of Tandilia—particularly expressed through the socio-territorial interface between the city of Tandil and the surrounding serrano space—cannot be understood solely through its physical and environmental attributes. Within this context, linked to the city of Tandil as the principal driver of contemporary serrano tourism, an earlier economic dimension emerges through mining activities that simultaneously constitute a historical-cultural legacy internalized as territorial heritage in association with the natural substrate of the relief and its iconic geoforms. Among these vestiges persist memories of anarchist immigrant stonecutters historically connected to artisanal stonework; the "corrales de piedra" or "corrales de indios," identified as singular post-Hispanic architectural remains associated with Indigenous communities (Pedrotta et al., 2013); and highly symbolic identity elements such as the Piedra Movediza or certain toponyms of debated origin, including Tandil. This assemblage confirms that territorial identity constitutes a dynamic and conflictive socio-spatial construction. Durán (2010) argues that such construction emerges from the interaction between actors and territories, insofar as collective imaginaries and everyday practices assign differentiated meanings to spaces. Haesbaert (2013) further asserts that territorial identities are multiple and mobile, shaped by processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization within contemporary globalization. Claval (2020) highlights the articulation between territorial identity and collective memory, understood as a set of spatial practices that consolidate belonging and sediment socially shared meanings. Within this framework, inhabitants resignify spaces in response to historical change, social struggles, and territorial transformations through processes integrating material and symbolic dimensions. These dynamics precede the new economic logics established in the present century, following the cessation of mining and the promotion of tourism marked by contractions and controversies that constitute the object of

analysis in this study, despite preservationist and ecotourism slogans advanced in governmental discourse.

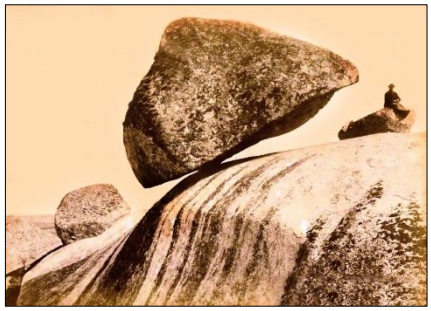

Figure 2. Piedra Movediza fallen in 1912, one of the territorial heritage elements recently revived through the replication of the geological specimen.
Source: CeGEHCS-IGEHCS (CONICET/UNCPBA).

This geological and cultural background acquires particular relevance in Tandil due to contemporary territorial pressures affecting the serrano landscape. Over the past three decades, the local territory has undergone a process of reconfiguration in which tourism emerges simultaneously as a consequence of productive transformations and as a structuring force generating new territorial dynamics, with an agro-financial orientation focused on the real estate development and commercialized ecotourism (Erbiti, 2004; Lan et al., 2010; Lapena, 2022). In the context of the Sierras de Tandil, whose geodiversity was historically exploited through agro-mining and industrial activities, and amid urban expansion and diversification of land uses, open-pit mining was progressively prohibited and a municipal ordinance aligned with the provincial Protected Landscape Law was established, representing a relevant regulatory instrument for conservation of the serrano relief, although its scope remains limited regarding sustainable geotourism, a dimension capable of strengthening preservation guarantees against contemporary territorial pressures.

Figure 3. Real estate expansion across the serrano landscape.
Source: Author's fieldwork (2025).

The central problem lies in the incongruence between, on the one hand, the normative regime established for territorial protection of the serrano landscape and, on the other, the actual dynamics of relief appropriation and territorial rent extraction. In the surroundings of the city of Tandil—areas with the highest tourist influx—a sustained expansion of housing and infrastructure is observed that does not correspond to local demographic growth or to residents' housing demand (Lapena, 2022). This phenomenon intensifies due to limited monitoring of Precambrian geological relics and through challenges typical of peripheral and rural areas

linked to primary and secondary productive activities. Although mining has been displaced and excluded from the city, environmental liabilities and unsustainable reconversions persist. These conditions reveal structural limitations of Ley provincial N.º 12.704 (Ley de Paisaje Protegido) and its implementing ordinance (Ordenanza municipal N.º 9.865/2005) (Schneider, 2022), whose effectiveness remains insufficient due to low levels of strict protection and the persistence of regulatory transgressions (Lapena et al., 2025).

The transition toward a model sustained by a landscape oriented toward affluent minorities and by real estate speculation disconnected from local socio-housing needs constitutes a structuring axis in the production of serrano space. Rather than consolidating an equitable regime of access and enjoyment, the dominant tourism profile displays selective characteristics: following the temporal target established by the Plan Estratégico de Turismo Sustentable Tandil 2020 (PETS, 2010), local practice reveals a marked orientation toward restricted commercial activity with limited accessibility for lower and lower-middle income groups (Lapena, 2022). This reorientation manifests through the contraction of historically accessible tourism services (public transportation, campsites, open-access trails, moderately priced food services) and the expansion of an offer directed toward higher-income sectors, including high-category hotels, gourmet gastronomy, and entrance fees to recreational properties. Consequently, the serrano landscape becomes progressively captured by exclusionary valorization logics that transform geodiversity into symbolic and financial capital.

Landscape commodification in the serrano environment articulates with processes of differential land valorization and selective real estate expansion that strain territorial planning. Intercensal sociodemographic analysis indicates that between 2001 and 2022 the population of Tandil district increased by 33.8%, from 101,228 to 145,575 inhabitants, exceeding regional, national, and provincial averages. Simultaneously, the housing stock expanded by 97.6% and households by 72.6%, a divergence that challenges prevailing urban development logics and suggests the consolidation of construction as a store of value (INDEC, 2001, 2022; Linares et al., 2022; Girado et al., 2024; Valente Ezcurra et al., 2025). Moreover, tenure regimes show a sustained shift toward rental occupancy: tenant households increased from 15.5% (2001) to 29.8% (2022), while homeownership declined from 70.4% to 55.4%. This trend reflects advancing land financialization, short-term turnover oriented toward rent extraction, and increasing difficulty in accessing formal property ownership, particularly among workers with lower-middle incomes (Migueltorena y Lan, 2022).

This scenario poses a decisive tension for geoconservation. Somoza et al. (2021) indicate that in Tandil district more than three-quarters of the surface area has been transformed, accompanied by the disappearance of native flora and fauna as well as the loss of geological substrate and serrano outcrops. This diagnosis reinforces the urgency of a geoconservation agenda capable of strengthening preservation through geotourism and sustainability-oriented legislation. In this perspective, the sociocultural and scientific-educational values of the area delineate conservation objectives linked to geotourism, understood as a vector of territorial valorization capable of articulating neighborhood identity, heritage, environmental liabilities, and landscape. Hall and Williams (2019) emphasize that this orientation requires equitable opportunities for resident participation in tourism activities, ensuring real access to benefits under the principles of sustainable development and community strengthening. In accordance with UNESCO (2004), geological heritage may assume central social, cultural, and economic roles associated with management strategies and optimal use of geological resources.

Problems potentially compromising the integrity of the geological dimension have been associated, in previous studies, with investment limitations and weak articulation between geological sites and geotourism initiatives (Lapena, 2022). Additional factors include

references to property disputes, heterogeneous social valuation regarding geological environmental conservation among residents, visitors, and governmental actors, as well as still-incipient connections between education and geological heritage. Within this context, existing conservation initiatives have been characterized as partial, without conclusive evidence supporting the consolidation of an integrated geoconservation policy (Schneider, 2022). This scenario raises questions concerning contemporary forms of serrano landscape appropriation and the territorial rationalities guiding its valorization, issues examined in the following sections.

Within this framework, the article analyzes everyday modes of spatial appropriation of the serrano environment and social perceptions associated with it, identifying convergences and dissonances between institutional and expert discourse—reconstructed through semi-structured interviews—and representations held by the local population, collected through a structured survey administered to residents. The study advances an interpretative hypothesis: protective regulations operate in a partial and selective manner and therefore function as a declarative framework incapable of effectively regulating the commodification of the relief, thereby enabling persistent forms of territorial exclusion. The contribution of this work lies in providing a diagnostic assessment of inconsistencies, vested interests, controversies, and potential solutions from a socio-territorial and sustainability-oriented perspective.

METHODOLOGY

The study is grounded in a methodological design based on semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants belonging to differentiated institutional scales—Dirección de Turismo del Municipio de Tandil and Secretaría de Turismo de la Provincia de Buenos Aires—as well as experts possessing situated knowledge of the territory, including a scholar specialized in sustainable tourism and geotourism and a geographer focused on demographic dynamics and urban habitat. These interviews enabled the reconstruction of interpretations concerning the dominant tourism profile, regulatory tensions associated with the Protected Landscape, and territorial mechanisms of differential land valorization linked to real estate and tourism dynamics.

In parallel, a stratified survey was administered to 307 residents according to demographic proportions by census tract, designed to capture diverse profiles and positions regarding the serrano landscape. The instrument allowed the collection of key indicators related to the land-use variable, including frequency and intensity of use, modes of spatial appropriation, perceptions of environmental degradation and conflict, patrimonial and identity-based valuation of the serrano system, and normative preferences concerning access and management. Finally, fieldwork campaigns were carried out through territorial observation and photographic documentation across urban, peri-urban, and serrano sectors, with the purpose of verifying patterns of appropriation, material transformations, and contested spatial scenarios, while strengthening comparative interpretation among social representations, institutional diagnoses, and expert assessments.

RESULTS

The empirical findings allow reconstruction of a convergent pattern: the serrano landscape of Tandil was formerly configured as a territory of everyday use and collective identity, except in areas adjacent to or coexisting with open-pit mining until 2014. However, the implementation of the Protected Landscape framework, conceived as an advanced environmental initiative, introduced new transgressive economic logics, both in terms of privatization of the serrano space and the expansion of real estate development and commercial

activities, strengthened by legislation lacking specificity or allowing regulatory loopholes, compounded by insufficient oversight.

Key informants unanimously confirm a process of restructuring of the tourism profile toward a selective, commercial, and restricted modality, evidenced by 4,834 constructions, facilities, exotic tree plantations, hydraulic works, and road infrastructure developed under the validity of the regulation, according to a comparative satellite image assessment between 2014 and 2025. Associated with these transformations, progressive losses in accessibility to iconic heritage sites have been identified, aggravated by the absence of public transportation, the decline of community recreational uses, and the disappearance of affordable gastronomic services, among other factors. Survey results complement interview data by revealing the contraction of camping areas, the reduction of open-access trails, and the decreasing availability of spaces suitable for family outdoor recreation.

Conversely, field assessments corroborate interview evidence by documenting the proliferation of high-category hotels, gourmet gastronomy, and entrance fees to recreational properties—associated with mechanisms of landscape value capture concentrated in limited actors—at a ratio of 3 to 1 in fiscal and administrative terms based on commercial declarations analyzed within the temporal scope of the study.

Figure 4. Hotel in the serrano landscape.
Source: Author's fieldwork (2025).

Survey results also confirm patterns of transgression and exclusion that intensify within the hills rather than in the valley where the historic urban center is located. This tendency is explained by the mismatch between population numbers and the volume of constructions: in the peripheral serrano area, of 4,834 recorded instances of spatial appropriation, only 2,023 inhabitants reside (more than two constructions per inhabitant), compared with a proportion of one construction for every three inhabitants in other areas. Despite this imbalance, residents maintain a high level of everyday spatial appropriation. Furthermore, 71.8% of residents report a visitation frequency equal to or greater than once per month, with a core of intensive use characterized by weekly visits (27.0%) and several visits per week (19.8%). Meanwhile, itinerant populations display an intermediate level of engagement, although with a higher proportion of occasional use. This pattern materializes through recurring practices such as walking, running, and cycling, alongside contemplative activities—drinking mate and landscape appreciation—along a central serrano corridor integrating Lago del Fuerte, Monte Calvario, Paseo de los Pioneros, Parque El Centinela, and Parque Lítico La Movediza. By contrast, actors involved in shaping the serrano landscape tend to appropriate the landscape as an exclusive environment.

This sampling confirms explicit demands to halt construction, rejection of privatization processes, and concern regarding negative effects that extend beyond infrastructure-related impacts, including increased waste presence, degradation of traditional trails, increasingly recurrent fire outbreaks, and other transgressions detrimental to the geoconservation objectives pursued by the Protected Landscape law. Indeed, most respondents express heightened dissatisfaction with a space formerly perceived as inclusive, now characterized by motorcycle and quad circulation, installation of cabins, fencing restricting access to serrano geoforms, real estate developments, and land uses that undermine socio-spatial equity while also generating downstream environmental impacts, particularly flooding, wildfires, and mass movement processes, among other consequences.

Figure 5. Recreational uses of the serrano landscape.
Source: Author's fieldwork (2025).

Finally, both interviews reveal a not always sustainable linkage between recent tourism expansion and transformations in the land market, characterized by processes of differential and speculative landscape valorization benefiting a minority that enjoys exclusive amenities, including rents derived from commercialized ecotourism. Both interviewees agree that the regulatory framework is adequate in formulation but insufficient in effective implementation due to monitoring deficits, exceptions, irregular constructions, and legislative loopholes—such as the installation of containers—which also operate as mechanisms of real estate valorization of the landscape as a dominant territorial force. This dynamic translates into exclusivity based on panoramic views, natural surroundings, and symbolic prestige, factors that influence land prices driven by selective developments on slopes and in areas of high scenic quality.

Figure 6. Containers transgressing regulatory provisions.
Source: Author's elaboration based on Airbnb listings (January 2026).

Overall, the results reveal a structural incongruence: while the population maintains strong attachments and broad patrimonial valuations of the serrano landscape, and the normative framework proclaims protection, effective territorial dynamics consolidate a selective model that commodifies the relief, constrains accessibility, and weakens the foundational principles of the Protected Landscape.

DISCUSSION

The empirical evidence supports the interpretation that the serrano landscape of Tandil constitutes a socio-territorial system shaped by a structural contradiction between its broad symbolic valorization and the selective mechanisms regulating its contemporary appropriation. The findings indicate that tourism does not function merely as an economic activity but rather as an active agent of territorial production capable of reorganizing land uses, redefining accessibility, and socially resignifying the landscape. In this sense, the results substantiate the initial hypothesis: the existing regulatory framework operates primarily at a declarative level and exhibits limitations in effectively regulating processes of landscape commodification.

The convergence between key informant interviews and survey results reveals a persistent dissociation between institutional sustainability discourses and observed territorial dynamics. Although planning instruments formally promote conservation, territorial practice demonstrates the consolidation of a selective tourism model associated with real estate valorization and the generation of differential land rent. Under these conditions, the serrano relief tends to function as symbolic capital incorporated into financial logics rather than as non-renewable geological heritage subject to active conservation strategies.

These findings engage with socio-territorial interpretations that conceptualize tourism as a mechanism of spatial production rather than a mere activity of consumption. The transformation of scenic value into territorial rent reinforces processes previously identified in studies addressing urban expansion and land valorization in Tandil (Lan et al., 2010; Migueltorena, 2020; Lapena, 2022). However, the present study contributes an additional dimension by demonstrating that geological singularity remains largely aestheticized and lacks institutional translation into systematic geoeducation or geoconservation policies. Consequently, geodiversity tends to assume a predominantly aestheticized role within the dominant tourism imaginary, without consolidating as an operational category of territorial governance.

The resident survey introduces a significant counterpoint. High levels of everyday use and broad patrimonial valuation indicate that the serrano space continues to operate as a collective territorial asset integrated into urban life. This form of social appropriation contrasts with restrictive tendencies derived from privatization processes, limited access, and tourism offerings oriented toward high-income segments. Territorial conflict therefore does not emerge from a lack of social recognition of the landscape but from the perception of its progressive erosion. The relief thus becomes a contested space where divergent rationalities converge: community use, conservationist discourse, and market-oriented valorization.

Demographic and housing analysis adds structural depth to this interpretation. The divergence between population growth and expansion of the housing stock supports readings associated with processes of urban land financialization. The disproportionate increase in housing suggests dynamics oriented toward value accumulation rather than the satisfaction of socio-housing demands. Within this context, tourism acts as a catalyst for broader territorial transformations, contributes to the reproduction of spatial inequalities, and restricts access to formal housing for middle- and lower-middle-income sectors.

From the perspective of territorial governance, the central issue lies not in the absence

of regulatory instruments but in their partial implementation. Interviews highlight monitoring deficits, recurrent exceptions, and adaptive practices that circumvent existing regulations. Informal residential modalities and unconventional constructions illustrate mechanisms through which regulatory effectiveness diminishes. Paradoxically, the very condition of Protected Landscape may increase the economic valorization of the area and stimulate territorial pressures that weaken conservation objectives.

The results also reveal the marginal position of geotourism within the local tourism system. Despite its recognized potential among experts and residents, geotourism remains subordinated to short-term economic strategies. The absence of geosite hierarchization, interpretive infrastructure, and systematic educational programs prevents consolidation of a tourism model oriented toward geoconservation. This situation confirms that regulatory protection alone remains insufficient without active processes of territorial mediation capable of articulating scientific knowledge, community participation, and public management.

The discussion suggests that the analyzed problem does not stem from a lack of patrimonial values or social disinterest, but rather from the predominance of economic rationalities that redefine the meaning of the landscape through selective processes of territorial valorization. The Tandil case demonstrates that Protected Landscapes may simultaneously function as conservation instruments and as drivers of spatial commodification. Within this framework, geotourism emerges as a potential alternative capable of reconciling geological heritage with inclusive territorial governance, provided that political reorientation advances toward effective regulation, social participation, and recognition of the serrano relief as a public good.

CONCLUSIONS

The Sierras de Tandil constitute a geological singularity whose geoconservation remains at risk despite more than a decade under the Protected Landscape framework. The issue no longer concerns solely the impacts of open-pit mining, which left significant environmental liabilities, but also the emergence of new land uses predominantly governed by real estate logics that neither respond to local socio-housing demands nor align with forms of sustainable tourism rooted in community recreational traditions. Instead, increasingly exclusive and, in some cases, privatized spaces have emerged, which likewise fail to guarantee environmental care. At the same time, governmental actors have not fully institutionalized sustainability principles nor effectively enforced protective regulations, even where these have been explicit and theoretically resistant to the regulatory loopholes exploited by economic and private actors.

In order to advance geoconservation without disregarding the pre-existing coexistence and social ties maintained among tourists, visitors, and local residents—and simultaneously to generate revenue capable of supporting basic services and infrastructure, particularly waste collection and other necessary or preventive maintenance such as fire control and downstream flood mitigation—geotourism is proposed not only as an activity but also as a strategic opportunity to reorient relationships among the different analytical dimensions and the actors currently in tension. Nevertheless, beyond regulatory compliance, effective implementation requires prior environmental education initiatives and local development approaches that were not sufficiently incorporated at the time of the law's enactment and related regulatory measures that previously aspired to a sustainable horizon during the past decade.

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BETWEEN GLASSES AND LANDSCAPES: THE IMPACT OF WINERIES ON TOURISM RECONFIGURATION IN MORRO DO CHAPÉU, BA (BRAZIL)

Simone Neto de Santana Oliveira[1], Adriana Brambilla[2], Elídio Vanzella[3]

ABSTRACT: *Morro do Chapéu, a city located in the state of Bahia, is historically known for its natural landscapes of the Chapada Diamantina region and for its cultural heritage associated with the diamond-mining period of the early twentieth century, the city has recently begun to invest in viticulture and wine-related tourism. According to official sources, grape cultivation began around 2009–2010 and the first wineries were established from 2018 onward, contributing to the emergence of wine tourism as a new driver of local economic development. This study analyzes the development of wine tourism in Morro do Chapéu through a case study of two wineries. The research is bibliographic, documentary, and descriptive, adopting a qualitative approach. Data collection included field visits to the wineries, photographic documentation, interviews with staff responsible for visitor tours, and a review of documents related to the establishment of these enterprises. The results indicate that the wineries play an important role in strengthening tourism in the municipality by integrating wine production, tourism experiences, and the appreciation of the local landscape. Although wine tourism in the region is recent, the two wineries present distinct characteristics that complement each other and diversify the visitor experience. This diversification contributes to enhancing the attractiveness of the destination, increasing its visibility, and reinforcing the potential of wine tourism as a strategy for local tourism development.*

KEYWORDS: *Wine tourism. Viticulture. Tourism. Morro do Chapéu.*

INTRODUCTION

Morro do Chapéu, located in the state of Bahia, was officially established as a city in 1909. Its name is derived from a large hill shaped like a hat that rises more than 1,200 meters above sea level. Characterized by landscapes typical of the Chapada Diamantina region, the area's rocky highlands and panoramic views have historically attracted visitors seeking nature and adventure tourism experiences. In addition to its natural attractions, the city preserves significant historical and cultural heritage, including churches and colonial mansions dating back to the prosperous diamond-mining period of the early twentieth century (1920s). For many years, tourism in Morro do Chapéu was primarily oriented toward visitors interested in natural attractions such as Cachoeira do Ferro Doido and numerous other waterfalls in the region, as well as Gruta dos Brejões, which features remarkable geological formations. These sites, along with several caves and other natural landscapes, have long attracted visitors interested in nature and outdoor activities.

According to the Secretaria de Turismo do Estado da Bahia (Setur-BA) (2025), grape cultivation in the region began around 2009–2010, and the first wineries were established starting in 2018. This development gradually redirected the focus of local tourism toward wine tourism, consolidating a new driver of economic development in the region. In light of this transformation in the city's tourism dynamics following the establishment of wineries, this study addresses the following research question: What impact has winery development had on tourism in Morro do Chapéu, Bahia?

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Many destinations have sought to diversify their economic activities, including tourism associated with wine, commonly referred to as wine tourism or enotourism. According to Brambilla, Vanzella, and Brambilla (2026), this form of tourism refers to visits to locations where wine production and commercialization occur, encompassing activities related to grape cultivation, wine production, and wine tasting. Tourism related to vineyards and wine has experienced notable growth in both supply and demand. On the supply side, wineries, museums, events, and other sectors associated with wine culture have organized themselves to offer an increasingly diverse range of products and services. On the demand side, tourists show a growing interest in experiences related to wine and vineyard culture.

A notable aspect of wine tourism is visitors' interest in direct interaction with producers. The presence of producers during visits is an important distinguishing feature of this activity. Visitors also demonstrate a strong interest in the history of local workers and residents, as well as in learning about their sociocultural contexts and the ways of life of previous generations (Brambilla & Vanzella, 2017). In this context, the present study aims to examine the structure of wine tourism through an analysis of two wineries in Morro do Chapéu.

METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as bibliographic, documentary, and descriptive research with a qualitative approach, using a case study of the city of Morro do Chapéu, Bahia, Brazil. It observed and described the structure developed for wine tourism following the establishment of wineries in the city. Data collection was conducted in four stages. First, field research was conducted at the two wineries examined in this study, including photographic documentation and an interview with the employee responsible for leading the tour through all areas of the facility. During the visit, technical information was provided about the entire production process, from grape cultivation to the final product. Second, a bibliographic and documentary survey was conducted in the city of Morro do Chapéu, Bahia, focusing on the establishment and development of the wineries. Third, the collected data were organized and described, highlighting differences and advances in tourism opportunities resulting from the establishment of these enterprises. Finally, a comparative analysis of tourism opportunities was conducted, considering the two wineries visited. To avoid directly identifying the wineries, they are referred to in this study as Winery A and Winery B.

RESULTS

During visits to the wineries included in this study, the following information was collected: year of establishment, grape varieties cultivated, number of wine labels produced, number of visits per month and/or year, and the type, quantity, and quality of experiences offered to visitors, as well as the impact of each enterprise on tourism activity in the city. The analysis indicated two of the four wineries currently operating in the city have the greatest economic and tourism impact based on the aspects described above, which were also used as the selection criteria for this study. These wineries are referred to here as Winery A and Winery B. The analyses were conducted using a comparative approach (without value judgment), aiming to provide detailed information about the tourist experience offered by these establishments and to examine how their presence has influenced tourism activity in the city of Morro do Chapéu.

The first difference between the wineries lies in the organization of their spaces and the design of the tourist experience. Winery A, a pioneer in scientific studies related to grape cultivation (2008), supported by approximately ten years of research preceding the establishment of the enterprise, offers a welcoming environment and contemporary

architecture. The experiences provided are primarily oriented toward immersion in the world of winemaking and the appreciation of natural landscapes. This configuration promotes a stronger connection with nature through guided visits to the vineyards and wine tastings held in outdoor spaces. The winery also features rustic settings that are particularly suitable for digital tourism records, such as photographs shared on social media. Figures and mosaics illustrating these aspects are presented throughout the analysis.

Figure 1 – First wine labels

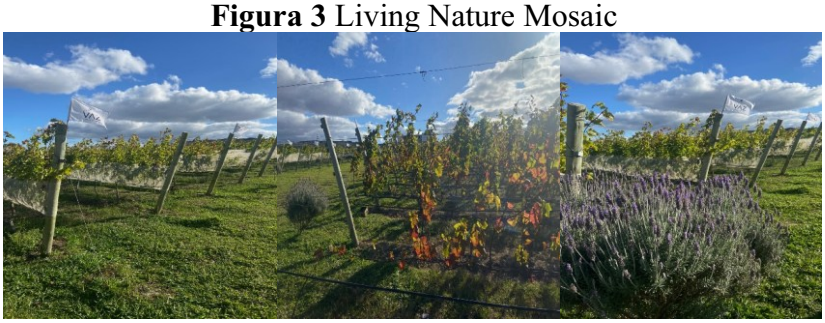
Source: Research data

Figure 2 – Aerial view and entrance

Source: Bahia Terra Turismo

Figure 1 shows the first eight wine labels produced by the winery after more than ten years of research. This represents a considerable number for a location with no previous history of wine production. The history of the site is presented in a chronological photo gallery, inside a chalet/wine cellar, designed in the shape of an oak barrel (see photo above). Numerous shelves display a wide variety of wine labels produced by the winery. This space currently functions as a chalet that, according to the local guide, is expected to become an additional tourist attraction in the future. Visitors may eventually have the opportunity to stay there, allowing them to enjoy a more complete tourism experience. Figure 2 presents a panoramic view of the outdoor tasting areas located next to the vineyards, the chalet described above, and the structure set up for the sale of wine labels, consisting of a shop located at the side entrance of the establishment.

Figura 3 Living Nature Mosaic



Source: Research data

The three images that compose the mosaic in figure 3 reinforce the perception that the site's natural landscapes contribute to increased visitation by visitors seeking a connection with nature and immersion in the world of vineyards. This visit is guided by a winery staff member who provides technical explanations covering the entire process, from the initial stages of the project to the moment the wine reaches the consumer's table.

Figure 4- Awards mosaic

Source: Research data

Figure 4 shows some of the awards the winery has received in recognition of the quality of the wines produced and its pioneering role in introducing this activity to the region. These distinctions are displayed in a space included in the visitor tour, as well as in the shop where visitors can purchase wines from a variety of vintages suited to different tastes.

Figure 5 presents "Instagrammable" spaces designed for photographs likely to be shared on social media. These areas were carefully planned and arranged to highlight the most favorable angles of each setting. The space also includes a shop where visitors can purchase wine and personalized wine glasses.

Figure 5- Digital Tourism Mosaic

Source: Research data

For the past five years, the winery has also organized a themed event called the Winter Harvest Festival (Vindima de Inverno). According to information obtained from the interviews, the most recent edition brought together approximately 300 participants, including public authorities, entrepreneurs, producers, and numerous visitors, who took part in an experience combining culture, tourism, and local economic development. The event program included activities such as traditional grape stomping, regional gastronomy, musical performances, interaction with local handicrafts, and tastings of wines produced by the winery.

According to the report, the municipality is developing a project called "Caminho dos Vinhos" (Wine Route), which consists of a route connecting the city's wineries. In addition to this initiative, several residential developments aimed at individuals interested in wine-related activities are expected to be established.

It was also reported that an innovative development will be built in the city of Morro do Chapéu through a partnership between Winery A and the municipal government. According to *Bahia Econômica* magazine, the city is currently experiencing a particularly favorable moment in the development of viticulture and has successfully attracted new investments. Among these initiatives is the construction of the first planned neighborhood, "Cidade Vinícola" (Wine City), a residential complex that will include housing units, a hotel, restaurants, and several amenities integrated with wine production, aimed at further promoting wine tourism in the region.

In contrast, Winery B differs in the structure of its facilities and the type of experience it offers visitors. While Winery A places greater emphasis on the appreciation of natural landscapes, combining wine tasting with guided visits through outdoor spaces, Winery B features a more modern architectural design, with several areas specifically created for photographs and digital sharing. This approach attracts visitors who are more engaged with social media and accustomed to documenting their experiences in real time, allowing them to interact with their online networks.

Figure 6- Planned landscapes

Source: Research data

Upon arrival at the establishment, visitors encounter a modern building that houses both the shop and the wine production area, which is included in the guided tour. A wooden gateway customized with the winery's brand, along with a gate barrier, marks the entrance to the Chalé do Roma Negra area (restricted to guests), although visits are permitted when the chalet is not rented. The overall impression is that of entering a rural estate. The landscaping has been carefully designed to highlight both the natural beauty of the site and the architectural elements intended to make the spaces more suitable for photographs taken by visitors.

Figure7- Vineyards

Source: Research data

The mosaic in figure 7 presents part of the vineyards of Winery B, organized according to grape varieties and planting periods. Visitors have access to the vineyards accompanied by a local guide, who explains the entire cultivation process, including planting, harvest periods, and the management of potential pests, while also encouraging questions and discussion. After this stage of the tour, visitors proceed to the production area and, finally, to the tasting session and the purchase of wine labels and other grape-based products, as shown in the fotos below:

Figure 8- Content Creation for Digital Media

Source: Research data

The mosaic presented in figure 8 indicates a clear intention to promote Winery B through visitors' interaction with spaces that were deliberately designed for this purpose. These environments are intended to attract a public that increasingly shares their travel experiences online, producing real-time records, tourism-related videos, and vlogs that foster a more direct connection with their audiences. Figure 9 shows two chalets with verandas, decks, a shared leisure area, and landscaped surroundings. These accommodations are available for visitors who wish to experience the winery more fully and engage more closely with its production processes. According to the local guide, the number of chalets is expected to increase in the future.

Figure 9- Full experience

Source: Research data

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Tourism represents an economic alternative that can generate employment and revenue in many countries. As the sector expands, it diversifies into different segments, focusing on the use of natural and cultural resources to meet the needs and preferences of specific audiences.

The Northeast region of Brazil is widely known for its warm climate throughout the year, tropical landscapes, and beaches, making sun and sea tourism one of its main attractions. However, many cities in the Northeast, such as Morro do Chapéu, have sought to differentiate themselves by developing strategies to attract visitors beyond the sun and sea tourism segment. In this context, the present study was developed to analyze wine tourism in a city that has been investing in attracting visitors interested in wine-related tourism.

The analysis of the wineries revealed that these enterprises play a significant role in strengthening tourism activity in the city of Morro do Chapéu, particularly by integrating wine production, tourism experiences, and the appreciation of the local landscape.

It is noteworthy that, although wine tourism has developed only recently, the two wineries examined present distinct characteristics. While Winery A stands out for prioritizing experiences focused on immersion in wine culture and the appreciation of natural landscapes, Winery B offers a more contemporary tourism experience, characterized by modern architecture, planned landscaping, and spaces strategically designed for photographs and interaction on digital media. These distinct approaches contribute to strengthening wine tourism in the region, as visitors can engage in different types of experiences rather than encountering a single, repetitive model that could eventually reduce visitor flow over time.

Both wineries demonstrate significant potential to strengthen tourism in Morro do Chapéu by increasing the destination's visibility, encouraging new investments, and contributing to the economic and tourism development of the region.

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UNLOCKING TOURIST POTENTIAL: PUBLIC INSIGHTS AND PERSONAL CONTIBUTIONS OF BANJA LUKA RESIDENTS

Marija Vukadin Milojević*[1], Svetlana Tepavac*[2], Igor Stamenković[3]

ABSTRACT: *The local residents represent the key partners in the development of tourism in a destination. Their cooperation and involvement often play a crucial role in the development and enhancement of the tourism product. Methodology: A total of 148 responses were collected via Google Forms. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyse the data. Responses to open-ended questions were examined using inductive thematic analysis, while descriptive analysis was used to present the characteristics of the sample.*

Aim: The aim of this study is to analyse public opinion regarding the changes needed for tourism development and to examine how the local population perceives its role in tourism. Findings: The respondents primarily associate the development and functioning of the tourism product with the quality of life at the destination, particularly with aspects such as traffic organisation and the management of public institutions. At the same time, they show certain affinities towards facilities and services intended exclusively for tourists, such as tourist infrastructure. When it comes to their own involvement in the tourism product, respondents most often perceive their role in the promotion of the destination. However, a significant number of respondents do not recognise their specific role in the development of the tourism product and are unsure of how they could become actively involved. The findings highlight the importance of raising awareness among local residents about their potential role in tourism development and encouraging their active participation in shaping the tourism product.

KEYWORDS: *local residents, tourism development, Banja Luka, urban tourism.*

INTRODUCTION

The local residents represent a crucial stakeholder in a tourism destination, as tourism takes place within the space of their everyday lives. Unlike tourists, local residents perceive the destination in a more complex way, since it is a place where they generate economic benefits, communicate with other members of the community, use various resources that influence their quality of life and enjoy natural and cultural resources for their own well-being (Kovačić et al., 2024). Present-day tourists increasingly show interest in the attitudes of the local population towards the place they are visiting, as well as in the traditions that are interpreted to them (Grižinić, 2018).

One of the crucial stakeholder groups at destinations are residents because their attitudes can significantly influence tourism development, the creation of tourism products and their future (Rudan, 2012; Tepavčević et al., 2019). As an important partner within the destination, it is essential for local residents to express their views regarding the place and the way tourism is developed and managed.

Tourism, as an economic activity, represents a development opportunity for many areas, particularly in urban environments and city centres. With the development of mass tourism, cities have become attractive and multifunctional destinations that attract many visitors with different travel motives throughout the year, generating significant economic effects for tourism and related economic sectors (Podovac, 2016). In the entity of Republika Srpska, Bosnia and

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Herzegovina, cities generate significant tourist traffic, and among the most important tourist centres is the entity's administrative centre, the city of Banja Luka.

The aim of this paper is to analyse public opinion using the example of the city destination Banja Luka, with the objective of identifying which elements of the city's offer could be further developed for tourists and how the local population perceives its role in improving the tourism offer. Accordingly, respondents were asked two questions:

1. In your opinion, what should be changed or improved in the city to make Banja Luka more attractive to tourists?

2. How could you personally contribute to making Banja Luka more attractive to tourists?

The responses were grouped into categories and subsequently analysed in relation to the relevant literature. A qualitative–quantitative analysis was conducted in which responses were categorised and interpreted. In addition to the introduction, the paper consists of a literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Impacts of Tourism Development on Local Communities

In recent research, the attitudes of the local population towards tourism have been frequently investigated and studies focusing on the Southeast European region indicate that residents generally hold favourable attitudes towards the development of certain forms of tourism or towards tourism in general (Besermenji et al., 2024; Milošević et al., 2020; Soldić Frleta & Smolčić Jurdana, 2023; Tepavčević et al., 2019). However, these views are not always unambiguous, as tourism can also generate certain negative consequences.

Tourism has a range of both positive and negative impacts on the destinations where it occurs. The literature most commonly identifies three main types of impacts: economic, socio-cultural, and ecological (physical) (Stojanović, 2023). These impacts inevitably affect the local population, which is an integral part of the destination.

According to the literature on residents' perceptions of tourism impacts, Pičuljan et al. (2018) identify several positive economic impacts, including increased employment, development of infrastructure and public facilities, higher investment, improved standards of living, greater purchasing power, and increased income. Positive social impacts include improvements in the quality of life of residents, enhanced recreational and cultural opportunities, enriched social and cultural life, opportunities for intercultural interaction, strengthened social relations, and a heightened sense of local identity (Rudan, 2012; Pičuljan et al., 2018). Positive ecological impacts of tourism primarily involve the valorisation and protection of natural and cultural assets, infrastructure improvements, effective visitor management, and related benefits (Pičuljan et al., 2018; Stojanović, 2023).

Tourism inevitably also generates negative impacts. Some of the negative economic impacts of tourism development in a destination include rising prices of goods, services, real estate, and general living costs, benefits accruing primarily to foreign investors, and increased costs associated with maintaining tourism infrastructure (Piculjan et al., 2018; Stojanović, 2023). Socio-cultural negative impacts can influence residents directly and may lead to tensions between hosts and tourists. Tourism development in a particular area can affect aspects of local culture such as heritage, language, religion, and traditions (Milićević & Trišić, 2019), potentially, in the long term, resulting in a loss of cultural authenticity.

When tourism is not supported by the local community and contributes to a decline in quality of life, it can generate general dissatisfaction among residents (Ćatović, 2022), hostility towards tourists (Rudan, 2012), outmigration from central urban areas and protests against

visitors (Sever & Carić, 2025). Consequently, contemporary tourism planning emphasises the need to involve local communities in decision-making and destination management (Milićević & Trišić, 2019).

Beside tourists, tourism service providers are often associated with irresponsible behaviour towards the environment and insufficient respect for local natural resources (Šagovnović et al., 2022). For example, providers may contribute to gradual environmental degradation at destinations, while tourists frequently engage in environmentally irresponsible practices (Šagovnović & Stamenković, 2023). Ecological consequences may include overuse of natural resources, generation of significant solid waste, emissions and wastewater and broader environmental degradation (Ćatović, 2022). If the negative effects of tourism outweigh the positive, support for tourism development among residents may decline.

Community support is essential for achieving sustainable destination development, which underlines the importance of the local population as a key factor in tourism development (Milošević et al., 2020). Residents' attitudes towards tourism often depend on their perception of the balance between the positive and negative impacts it brings. While numerous studies indicate that local communities generally hold favourable views of tourism development, particularly regarding economic benefits and infrastructure improvements, potential negative effects that may influence quality of life are also recognised. Analysing local community perceptions can contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between tourism and quality of life, as well as identifying opportunities for enhancing the tourism offer in the destination.

Tourism in Banja Luka

Banja Luka is the second-largest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the largest and the capital of Republika Srpska, with approximately 186,000 inhabitants (Republika Srpska Institute of Statistics, 2025). The city of Banja Luka is the university, administrative, sports and traffic centre of the Republika Srpska entity. It is also a dominant migration centre with a continuous influx of population from other parts of the entity (Vranješ, 2025).

Tourism in Banja Luka has been the focus of several studies to date. Kovačić et al. (2019) focused on the Banja Luka brand as a tourist destination. When it comes to researching the attitudes of the local population and their attitudes to tourism, the author (Vukolić et al., 2023) examined the public opinion of the people of Banja Luka on the development of gastronomic tourism. Mirić et al. (2016) point out that Banja Luka is one of the most important parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the development of tourism, especially pointing to the fact that it is an important cultural, historical and urban centre. The potential of Banja Luka is not solely based on its cultural and historical attractions, because natural resources also play a significant role, and efforts should be made to develop forms of tourism that capitalise on these assets. Bidžan-Gekić et al. (2021) envisage Banja Luka as a future hub for recreational tourism, offering diverse attractions and locations whose appeal is rooted in the city's rich natural resources.

In 2024, approximately 493,000 tourist arrivals were recorded in Republika Srpska, of which 24.99% occurred in Banja Luka (Republika Srpska Institute of Statistics, 2025). Over the past five years, the average length of stay in the city has been around 1.53 days, indicating that tourists generally spend a relatively short period in Banja Luka.

Table 1. Tourist Traffic in Banja Luka from 2020 to 2024

Year		2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Tourist Arrivals	D	18097	26974	39543	43237	41769
	F	13712	28654	55299	73007	81497
	T	31809	55628	94842	116244	123266
Tourist Nights	D	25366	37146	55445	57225	55765
	F	23558	49148	90744	117461	130953
	T	48924	86294	146189	174686	186718
Days Spend		1.54	1.55	1.54	1.50	1.51

Source: (Authors work according to Republika Srpska Institute of Statistics, 2025)

Studies addressing tourism in Banja Luka to date have covered a wide range of topics. However, the city cannot be said to have a substantial body of research focused specifically on tourism, highlighting the need for a more systematic approach to studying this area. With regard to the investigation of local residents' perceptions of tourism and its development in Banja Luka, to the authors' knowledge, no studies have been recorded so far.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This research is designed as an exploratory-descriptive case study aimed at examining local residents' perceptions of urban tourism possibilities and their perceived role in tourism development in the city of Banja Luka. Using the combination of qualitative and quantitative elements, this research relies primarily on qualitative data obtained through open-ended survey questions, which were subsequently quantified using content analysis techniques.

Given the limited prior research on residents' perceptions of tourism development in Banja Luka, an exploratory approach was considered appropriate in order to identify dominant themes and issues emerging directly from respondents' narratives.

Data collection

Data for this study were collected in 2024 through social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) and via emails sent to relevant interest groups. The data collection tool employed was Google Forms, using a convenient sampling method with elements of snowball sampling, as respondents were encouraged to share the survey with others.

A total of 189 responses were collected. However, 148 respondents provided valid answers to both open-ended questions analysed in this study. Only these fully completed responses were included in the final analysis. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Data analysis

The responses to the open-ended questions were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The analysis was carried out in several stages:

1. Familiarisation with the responses – This initial phase included reading all the collected responses in order to become familiar with the content and gain insight into the patterns that appear in the data.

2. Initial coding – In this phase, the basic thematic units were recognised. The categories were formed inductively, that is, they emerged directly from the respondents' answers, without a pre-defined code framework.

3. Development of the categories – The next phase included the grouping of codes into broader thematic categories based on their content similarity. Categories were then clearly defined and named to ensure consistency in the classification of responses.

4. Data quantification – This phase involved the quantification of identified topics, that

is, counting the frequency of occurrence of certain categories. In this way, qualitative analysis was supplemented with elements of quantitative content analysis, which enabled a clearer presentation of the representation of certain topics in the sample.

Coding and systematisation of data was done using the Microsoft Excel program, which was used to organise responses, group thematic categories and quantify their frequency. The frequency of responses and representative examples of responses, translated from the Serbian language, will be presented in the results chapter. Open answers were analysed using the method of thematic analysis, whereby 12 categories were identified for recommendations for enchansing tourism development and 8 categories for local involvement in enhancing tourism. Respondents were able to list several proposals, which is why the sum of frequencies exceeds the number of respondents. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample.

Data sample

Regarding the sample, 148 responses were recorded, of whom 78.38% were female and 21.62% were male. The average age of respondents was 36.65 years, with most respondents (37.16%) being in the age category between 18 and 30 years. The majority of the sample (41.22%) said their income was above average. The average salary was set at 1.274 BAM (ca. €652), with a deviation threshold of ±50 BAM (ca. ±€25) above or below the average. The majority of respondents had completed either high school (40.54%) or a Bachelor's degree (39.86%), while only a very small proportion had primary education (0.68%) or a doctoral degree (0.68%). In terms of employment status, most participants were employed (75%), followed by university students (14.19%) and unemployed individuals (9.46%), whereas retirees represented only 1.35% of the sample.

GENDER	**Female**		**Male**	
Frequency (F)	116		78.38	
Percentage (%)	32		21.62	
AGE				
Mean age:	36.65			
Age Category	**>18 & ≤30**	**31-40**	**41-50**	**50-65**
Frequency (F)	55	37	37	18
Percentage (%)	37.16	25	25	12.16
INCOME LEVEL				
Income Category	**Below average**	**Similar to average**	**Above average**	**No income**
Frequency (F)	33	35	61	18
Percentage (%)	22.30	23.65	41.22	12.16
EDUCATION LEVEL				
Education Level	**Primary education**	**High school**	**College**	**Bachelor's degree**	**Master's degree**	**Doctoral degree**
Frequency (F)	1	60	5	59	21	1
Percentage (%)	0.68	40.54	3.38	39.86	14.19	0.68
EMPLOYMENT STATUS				
Category	**University student**	**Unemployes**	**Employed**	**Retired**
Frequency (F)	21	14	111	2
Percentage (%)	14.19	9.46	75	1.35

Table 2. Sample
Source: Authors

RESULTS

Recommendations for Enhancing Urban Tourist Attractiveness

Local residents know their city best. The reason for certain unattractive and dysfunctional aspects of the destination is noticed first and to a greater extent by the local population. Respondents were given the opportunity to indicate which aspects of Banja Luka as a destination should be improved in order to make it more attractive to tourists. The answers are grouped into 12 categories. In the largest proportion, respondents expressed dissatisfaction with traffic and public transport, while there are the few respondents who think that the situation in the city is good as it is.

The majority of responses (33.11%) related to dissatisfaction with traffic and public transport, particularly traffic congestion and the inefficiency of public transportation. The second most common response concerned the work of institutions (19.08%), specifically urban planning, construction regulation, institutional cooperation and legal frameworks. In third place in terms of the number of responses were tourist facilities (17.11%), where respondents suggested attractions that will primarily serve tourists. The population insists on certain content and attractions that will be primarily interesting to tourists (such as tourist tours, maps, cable cars, etc.) and certainly ultimately enrich the content for the local population. Regarding cultural, entertainment, and sports activities, approximately 16% of respondents believe that the offer should be improved and expanded.

Furthermore, topics such as: cleanliness and communal order (13.82%); promotion of the destination (13.82%), greenery and parks (11.18%), accommodation, prices and hospitality offers (10.53%), cultural and historical attractions (10.53%) and natural attractions (7.24%). In general, these findings potentially suggest that residents experience tourism through the quality of the overall urban environment, and not only through individual attractions.

There were also several imprecise yet valuable responses indicating that many aspects of the city of Banja Luka should be improved. Only 3.95% of respondents are satisfied with the current situation in the city, which clearly suggests that there is considerable room for improvement.

In the following Table, selected responses from the interviewees are presented in translation from the Serbian language.

Table 3. Recommendations for Enhancing Urban Tourist Attractiveness

Topic	Frequency	Percentage	Responses
Traffic and public transport	49	33.11	"Public transport and traffic infrastructure, especially outside the city centre." "...as well as solving traffic problems. Public transport is currently poor and expensive, which leads to problems with congestion and the lack of parking spaces. It is necessary to introduce daily and weekly tickets for city transport that would be valid for all transport providers, as well as to develop a useful application for monitoring and using this transport."
City management and institutions	29	19.08	"...improve cooperation between the tourist organisation and tourist organisations of municipalities and cities in the surrounding area, intensify cooperation with cities with which the city has signed agreements." "...Reduce the construction of buildings in the city centre and focus on building parks, museums, promenades

			and similar facilities that would encourage tourists to come to our city...."
Tourist attractions and facilities	26	17.11	"Organise tourist guide tours." "Introduce more panoramic buses." "Organise mini excursions to other places, so that they visit Banja Luka during some larger events, e.g. a weekend in Banja Luka or shopping in Banja Luka, with sightseeing and tourist guides."
Cultural, entertainment and sports events and activities	25	16.45	"More events and activities should be organised throughout the year, especially sports events, and in that way Banja Luka might become more interesting for visitors." "Organise more events for children." "Organise more sports, cultural and music events, especially during the summer season, accessible to a larger number of citizens. Some useful outdoor activities for children should also be organised."
Cleanliness, hygiene and communal order	21	13.82	"Pay more attention to the cleanliness of the city." "...arrange and clean the surrounding neighbourhoods." "...the city should be more orderly and the police should do their job better so that citizens feel safer."
Promotion	21	13.82	"I think there should be more media promotion." "More advertising of interesting attractions the city has." "Better marketing in the region."
Greenery, parks and the fight against over-construction	17	11.18	"Arrange and expand parks." "Better maintenance of green areas." "More greenery in the city centre, asphalt has taken everything over."
Cultural and historical attractions	16	10.53	"Pay attention to old architecture." "Arrange Kastel fortress and other cultural and historical monuments and organise the spaces that are currently overgrown with grass." "The museum offer should be enriched; different themes could be presented. We lack museum content."
Accommodation and hospitality offer and prices	16	10.53	"Regulate prices in cafés and restaurants." "There should be a more diverse gastronomic offer, more local, traditional dishes that are not limited only to grilled food, but without European-level prices." "Ensure a larger number of hotel accommodation facilities."
Natural attractions	11	7.24	"Improve natural resources." "...improve the banks of the Vrbas River." "Put emphasis on the Vrbas River and the canyon."
Other	6	3.95	"Many things." "Quite a lot." "Not sure."
Satisfied with the current situation	6	3.95	"There is enough of everything." "Nothing needs to be changed." "I think it is already attractive enough."

Local Involvement in Enhancing Tourism

The inclusion of the locals in the development of tourism and the tourist offer represents an important factor. Tourism also provides development opportunities for the local community.

Respondents perceive their greatest potential contribution to improving tourism in the city through promotional activities within the destination (30.41%). The majority believe that they can contribute most to tourism development through promotional activities, including direct, face-to-face promotion, but primarily through promotion on social networks.

The results indicate that as many as 25% of respondents have no clear idea of how they could participate in improving the situation in the community, which would simultaneously contribute to increasing the tourist attractiveness of the destination. Some responses suggest that respondents consider themselves insufficiently competent to engage in this area, while others explicitly state that they cannot identify their role in the tourism development of the destination.

The third most frequent response relates to Interaction with tourists (18.92%), including hospitality and friendliness, providing directions to tourists, sharing information, and similar forms of assistance.

Care for urban environment (15.54%) refers to aspects such as maintaining the cleanliness of the city and respecting regulations that affect its appearance. The local population believes that by doing so they can contribute to the development of the city and make it more attractive to tourists.

A similar proportion of responses falls into the categories of Volunteering and Participation in the organisation of events (8.11%) and Recommendations for improvement (7.43%). Respondents believe that participation in various initiatives, public debates, environmental actions, and similar activities can contribute to making Banja Luka a more attractive destination. Nevertheless, within the second mentioned category, many respondents also provided advice and recommendations on how the city's tourism product could be further improved, particularly through the enhancement of tourism infrastructure. In this context, tourism infrastructure includes physical, cultural, service-related and destination management components (Raina, 2005).

Only 6.08% of responses referred to respondents' potential entrepreneurial activities, such as renting rooms, opening restaurants, organising guided tours, and similar initiatives. It is interesting to note that only one respondent believes that the current tourism offer in the city is satisfactory and that no changes are necessary.

Table 4. Local Involvement in Enhancing Tourism

Topic	Frequency	Percentage	Responses
Promotion	45	30.41	"Carry out personal promotion of the city." "While travelling, share interesting facts about the city I come from." "Post beautiful images and stories about the city on social media."
Unsure how to contribute	37	25.00	"Since I am not involved in tourism, I have no idea how I personally could contribute to this field." "I am not sure that I personally can do anything." "Unfortunately, I cannot contribute to that in any way."
Interaction with tourists	28	18.92	"Be kind to everyone who approaches you." "By informing potential tourists about the city, its natural beauty, culture, tradition, important events and the availability of these through the city's websites." "By telling foreigners that Banja Luka is a beautiful city."
Care for urban environment	23	15.54	"Every citizen should take care of the cleanliness and orderliness of the city." "Through the lifestyle of myself and my family I already contribute to a more attractive appearance of the city. We do not park cars in places not intended for parking so that tourists do not have difficulty passing on pedestrian areas, we dispose of waste in designated places, and we do not destroy greenery or city property." "Less littering by residents."
Volunteering and participation in the organisation of events	12	8.11	"By participating in public debates, engaging in the local community, environmental associations and actions." "Participating in certain events."
Recommendations for improving tourism infrastructure	11	7.43	"More music and cultural events." "I would preserve all parks as they used to be and keep old buildings with their original façades as a symbol of old Banja Luka." "Provide public internet across the city, reduce transport prices, introduce tourist tickets. Introduce a larger number of flight routes and improve transport to the airport."
Entrepreneurship	9	6.08	"Rent out a room." "Open a pub where only rock and metal music is played, with various craft beers from local and wider production." "I could help as a guide to some interesting places in the city."
Everything is fine	1	0.68	"I think that the city has developed a lot recently and that Banja Luka has become a real tourist city."

DISCUSSION

In South-East European (SEE) countries, tourism plays a crucial role in economic development and export performance, making the adoption of sustainable tourism practices essential to ensure long-term competitiveness, environmental protection, and inclusive growth (Mustać, 2025).

Respondents primarily associate tourism attractiveness with the quality of life, followed by proposals that focus specifically on tourist-related solutions. According to respondents, it is perceived that many aspects require improvement, particularly infrastructure that serves the local population first and tourists second. Crucial areas include traffic management and the provision of parks. Consequently, as long as the quality of life in the tourist destination is not compromised, the population is likely to be satisfied with tourism development (Milosevic et al., 2020).

Similar to findings from Serbia (Kovačić et al., 2024), this research partially assesses residents' capacity to evaluate the situational framework of tourism development and management, a role previously considered the exclusive domain of other stakeholders, excluding the local population. Consistent with surveys of selected Serbian cities, residents identify problems related to various aspects of urban quality of life, which is a critical prerequisite for the purposeful engagement of citizens as direct beneficiaries aiming to improve the city's overall quality of life (Mirkov, 2016).

Recommendations for Enhancing Urban Tourist Attractiveness

Mobility and accessibility of the destination is one of the prerequisites and an important determinant for the development of tourism. At the same time, these aspects are not solely related to tourist attractiveness but also concern the functionality of the city and the daily lives of its residents. Without an efficient transport infrastructure, other tourism advantages lose their value. Improving the conditions of the transport infrastructure raises the quality of life, which is reflected, among other things, in the better valorisation of traffic and the geographical position of a certain area, and at the same time represents clear indicators of the development of an area (Đukičin Vučković et al., 2017). Ultimately, a well-developed transport infrastructure forms the foundation for more sustainable tourism development by helping to minimise the ecological footprint (Protić et al., 2023). Respondents are largely dissatisfied with the functioning of traffic at the destination, including the public transport system. Beyond facilitating arrival at the destination, traffic is also critical for tourist mobility within the city. Consequently, addressing issues that contribute to general citizen dissatisfaction is essential. Suggestions from the local population include bus stations with detailed timetables, better connections between the city centre and outskirts, and a more efficient ticketing system.

In addition to tourists and the local population, the key actors in the tourism system are employees in tourism, business entities in tourism as carriers of the tourist offer, local self-government and investors in tourist facilities (Jurišić et al., 2019). Respondents recognise the importance and role of local institutions and organisations, reflecting an awareness of the need for planned, strategic and sustainable destination management rather than isolated interventions that compromise the city's appearance. Further, respondents expressed concern about the city centre, particularly regarding excessive urbanisation, and suggested that future development and construction should be directed towards the outskirts. The city centre represents a kind of "showcase of the city", an area that is indispensable in tourist movements, and at the same time, it is the most dynamic and vital part of the city space (Pivac, 2004). Therefore, the management of the city centre should be approached with greater care to preserve its role as the city's showcase, while ensuring sustainable urban development.

About 17.11% of respondents saw the need to improve the tourist offer of the city by creating new attractions and expanding the offer that will primarily serve tourists, and potentially, depending on the proposal, the local population as well. The construction of new attractions (monuments, sculpture) and the introduction of new services (panoramic bus, taxi, tourist tours) primarily enrich the offer for tourists, secondarily for the local population, but the benefit for the local population is reflected in other aspects such as economic profit. About 10% of the respondents referred to the city's accommodation and catering offer and the price level. In general, the respondents here also favor diversification and enrichment of the offer, but also show tendencies towards price regulation in the city and their greater accessibility.

Many respondents indicated a lack of events and activities, particularly for specific groups such as young people and children. Research conducted on the local population of Vrbas city, Serbia, similarly indicates that the majority of respondents consider events to be crucial for tourism development (Tepavčević, 2019). Interestingly, the Development Strategy of the City of Banja Luka until 2027 states that event tourism is well-developed (Grad Banja Luka, 2018). This raises two potential issues: either the city has overestimated its current offer, or the events are designed primarily for tourists, with limited consideration for the needs of local residents. Diversifying the range of events and activities would enhance the Banja Luka tourism product and accommodate various forms of tourism, including business, cultural, gastronomic, adventure, and other types, depending on the nature of the events.

Respondents' answers indicate that there is equal concern for both the natural and cultural heritage of Banja Luka. A high sensitivity level to the issue of urban identity and the protection of cultural and natural resources is detected.

Culture as a motivational factor in urban tourism plays one of the most important roles (Vujičić et al., 2020). The Kastel fortress is located in the very centre of the city, and the local population calls for its restoration and adaptation to the tourist offer. Mostly the answers go in two directions – the respondents see the need to renovate the Kastel and to additionally affirm it by including different activities. Respondents also call for the preservation of old architecture and at the same time point to the importance of cultural institutions such as museums and galleries. Urban regeneration in the context of cultural tourism can be achieved in such a way that this form of tourism is systematically supported and managed according to the principles of cultural participatory management, without forgetting the importance of managing attractions and protecting assets (Grižinić, 2018). The valorisation of cultural assets is a multidisciplinary process (Radović et al., 2018) and the management of cultural heritage sites should ensure their sustainable and long-term protection in accordance with the needs of citizens, while simultaneously preserving and transmitting that heritage to future generations (Pivac et al., 2022). The potentials of Kastel are huge and partially used, and additional restoration and landscaping can contribute to the development of the tourist offer.

Beside the comments related to the Kastel fortress, the respondents showed great concern for the museums in the city. Museums today, besides the secondary function, often perform the primary tourist attraction function and often become generators of tourism in a certain place (Krivošejev, 2014). The Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of the Republic of Srpska are also located in the centre of the city, which increases accessibility for tourists. It is necessary to carry out the tourist valorisation of the museum by taking the following elements: tourist-geographical location, artistic values, tourist value of the environment, tourist attractiveness and recognisability, construction and equipment of the space and inclusion in the tourist wealth (Mijuk et al., 2023; Todorov et al., 2021).

Concern for natural attractions is expressed through two categories: Greenery and Natural attractions. Historically, Banja Luka has been referred to by locals as the "city of greenery." Green spaces in urban areas provide numerous benefits for residents, such as enhancing the environment, boosting social interaction and the creation of a more attractive city (Belčáková et al., 2022). Additionally, from the aspect of urbanisation, for example, urban gardens are helpful for adaptation, mitigation and resilience of the city (Tomatis et al., 2023). Natural landscape aesthetics is crucial for maintaining mental and physical health (Erdenejargal et al., 2021). Currently, the relationship between nature and society is marked by the intensive development of the tourism industry (Erdenejargal et al., 2021), which indicates that the importance of the natural environment for tourism is undeniable. Tourists value and aspire to see picturesque landscapes and a pleasant environment in which positive emotions reign, and the recognition of natural advantages and their assessment can ultimately contribute to the economic development of the region (Vukoičić et al., 2023). In Banja Luka, green areas and natural attractions can be integrated into an urban green infrastructure, which tourists can utilise for relaxation, socialisation, and cultural exploration (Terkenli et al., 2020). Responses also highlighted concerns about cleanliness, hygiene and communal services, which were perceived as unsatisfactory. Improper and illegal disposal of waste affects people's health, ecological imbalance and visual pollution of space. A key element in litter pollution in urban areas is the users' behaviour (Jafari et al., 2021). Considering the importance of public cleanliness for choosing a tourist destination, it is necessary to improve waste management through the development of infrastructure, increasing the efficiency of communal services and encouraging more responsible behaviour of citizens (Hezarvand et al., 2025).

Promotion was another area of concern with respondents emphasising that more intensive marketing could enhance the city's tourism profile. Modern ways of promoting a destination are coloured by new trends that include digital and mobile marketing, infrastructure, branding, quality, accessibility and information about a specific destination (Florido-Benítez, 2022). As part of the promotion of the destination by local authorities, it is necessary to make inclusive and participative decisions that will involve the local population. Research into promotional materials has shown that the promotion carried out by local authorities does not necessarily reflect the real image of the area and portrays the local population in a different light in order to appeal to a certain market niche (Stone & Nyaupane, 2019). If Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) understand residents' perceptions and motivations, they can highlight these aspects in branding strategies, potentially allocating resources to strengthen these factors (Wassler, 2019).

Respondents also indicated the need to improve accommodation and catering facilities, particularly restaurants, diversify offerings and regulate prices. Gastronomic offerings are an integral part of the overall tourist experience (Ćirić et al., 2024). Banja Luka hosts numerous food and beverage establishments and enhancing their quality could enrich the overall tourism product. Additionally, human resource development within the hospitality sector is essential. Strengthening tourism-related skills and employee training can increase the sector's acceptance among residents and contribute to the positive social impacts of tourism (Milošević et al., 2020).

A small percentage of respondents (3.95%) expressed satisfaction with the current situation, while an equal proportion indicated that there is considerable room for improvement and did not provide concrete responses to this question.

Local Involvement in Enhancing Tourism

In planning tourism development, destination management must consider the initiatives of the local population, as this is essential for the systematic and high-quality development of tourism and for mitigating negative attitudes or resistance among residents (Rudan, 2012).

Most respondents identified their primary role in improving tourism in Banja Luka as contributing to destination promotion. Promotion of the destination is quite an important role when it comes to respondents. The literature recognises residents as brand ambassadors, promoting their city through positive word-of-mouth. City ambassadorship occurs when residents promote their city through positive word of mouth. By acting as ambassadors, residents create important touchpoints with potential visitors and help shape the city's image (Taecharungroj, 2016). Communication occurs through both direct interactions with tourists and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Responses in this study align with those reported by Wassler et al. (2019), who describe resident behaviour as brand ambassadors, for example, by sharing interesting posts about their city online. Further research indicates that psychological empowerment and trust in competent institutions significantly influence residents' willingness to act as destination brand ambassadors, highlighting the importance of their involvement in destination branding and management processes (Wassler et al., 2021). Greater knowledge of their place of residence also enhances residents' sense of psychological ownership, positively affecting their attitude and willingness to promote the destination (Gupta & Singh, 2024).

Another important category of responses concerned interaction with tourists. This is largely characterised by what Tse and Tung (2021) term active facilitation, which includes providing assistance, demonstrating kindness and hospitality, and initiating social contact. Authors recommend that DMOs create conditions that foster such interactions. The quality of interaction influences both the tourist experience and residents' acceptance of visitors (Armenski et al., 2011).

The development of tourism depends on the development of tourism infrastructure and the development of this type of infrastructure is connected with the growth of the destination's competitiveness (Jovanović & Ilić, 2016). Respondents highlighted the importance of this determinant, and the tourism development strategy of Banja Luka acknowledges the need for further investment in tourism infrastructure (Grad Banja Luka, 2018).

Local communities want to be involved in tourism development to ensure that their needs are taken into consideration (Obradović et al., 2020), which will potentially enable the satisfaction of the local population (Milošević et al., 2020). Public discussions, community activities and volunteer actions are therefore essential.

Further, respondents also noted that city cleanliness is unsatisfactory, yet many of them expressed willingness to participate in initiatives to address this issue, highlighting the potential for community-driven improvements that can enhance both residents' quality of life and the overall tourist experience.

Marković et al. (2020), studying border areas and sports events in Serbia, confirmed that residents recognise the need for tourism development but may not fully understand how to leverage tourist resources for personal or community benefit. Entrepreneurship, as a developing business philosophy today, represents a set of diverse abilities and functions related to organising, coordinating, supervising and managing business processes and actions (Radosavac et al., 2013). The entrepreneurial affinities of the respondents are at a low level and only a few ideas appear for developing tourism-related business activity. Education and awareness-raising on entrepreneurship could serve as an initial step to stimulate such development (Škrbić et al., 2019). Barriers at the national level in Bosnia and Herzegovina include limited access to finance, unfair competition, lack of demand, and administrative difficulties (Smailbegović &

Arnaut, 2018).

It is of great importance how tourism affects the local population, as well as how the population accepts the development of tourism, because based on this, the possible success of a tourist product can be predicted (Milošević et al., 2020).

A significant finding is that many respondents do not perceive a role for themselves in tourism activities. Residents, as integral participants in the tourist experience, must be aware that their role exists, whether passively or actively, which opens substantial opportunities for further stakeholder engagement and targeted interventions by local government and administration. Therefore, further strengthening of the community, as well as continuous education of the local population, is proposed. At the same time, the remainder of the sample, who do recognise their role in the destination's tourism, should not be overlooked, as their engagement can further contribute to sustainable tourism development.

CONCLUSIONS

The main findings indicate that the respondents primarily associated the development and functionality of the tourist product with the quality and functionality of life at the destination (such as traffic and management of institutions). At the same time, residents demonstrate certain affinities towards content designed exclusively for tourists, such as tourist infrastructure. In some areas, discrepancies between the current tourism strategy and public opinion were observed.

Regarding the role of the local population, the results show that a significant number of residents do not perceive their role in the tourism offer. This highlights both a concern and an opportunity for further engagement and education, emphasising the importance of residents' active participation in tourism development. Interestingly, the study also reveals a link between residents' perception of the value of Banja Luka's tourist product and their own potential contribution, particularly in areas such as destination promotion, event organisation, care for the urban area and similar. Respondents identified shortcomings in the city's tourist offer and simultaneously proposed solutions in which they could take an active role. This indicates that the will of the local population exists and that it is necessary to work on affirmative measures that would refer to the activism of the local population.

Theoretical Contributions: his study provides three main theoretical contributions. The theoretical contribution of the work is primarily reflected in the continuation of the discussion on the perception and role of the local population in the development of the tourist offer on the example of a small southeastern European city. Banja Luka has not been often presented in tourism research and comprehensive studies on residents' perceptions have been limited, so this research addresses a gap in the regional literature on urban tourism. Second, the results confirm the importance of different roles of residents in tourism development. A significant proportion of the respondents see their role in promotional activities, while a quarter of respondents do not recognise their own role in the development of tourism. This finding expands the discussion on the psychological empowerment of residents and indicates that the perception of personal relevance can represent a key prerequisite for sustainable and participatory development of a destination. Third, through inductive thematic analysis, the study identified twelve categories of perceived destination improvements and seven categories of self-perceived contribution. This resulted in a contextual analytical framework that can serve as a foundation for future comparative research in other urban contexts.

Practical Contributions: The work provides concrete empirical indicators on the priorities and role of the local community in improving the tourist offer. Key areas of intervention have been identified, including traffic infrastructure, preservation of green areas, valorisation of cultural and historical heritage and promotion of promotional activities. The results can serve as a basis for adapting local development strategies to the real perceptions and needs of the population.

Managerial Contributions: From a managerial perspective, the study offers guidelines for destination management. Improving the quality of the urban environment directly enhances perceived tourist attractiveness. The willingness of some residents to act as destination promoters opens opportunities to develop programmes that actively involve the local population in branding and promotion initiatives. Furthermore, the need for greater citizen participation in planning processes underscores the importance of inclusive and participatory tourism management.

Limitations: The study's limitations primarily relate to the sample. Future research should increase the sample size to improve reliability and ensure demographic diversity. The current sample had a gender imbalance (78% female, 22% male) and an age structure that may influence the results. Additionally, the online survey format (Facebook, Instagram, email) may have excluded individuals who do not use these platforms. Open-ended questions and thematic analysis involve subjective interpretation, which may introduce a degree of subjectivity in classification and quantification. Finally, data were collected at a single point in 2024, and residents' attitudes may change over time due to new projects, policy shifts, or other contextual factors. Also, this paper refers exclusively to an urban environment.

Future research: Primarily, future studies should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample to gain a more representative understanding of local perspectives. Each of the presented categories offers a foundation for deeper investigation, particularly regarding the role of residents in destination promotion, their interaction with tourists and the quality of tourism infrastructure. Additionally, research could explore residents' attitudes towards sustainable tourism, the development of local entrepreneurship and the long-term impacts of tourism on the community's quality of life. Such studies would provide valuable insights to inform more inclusive and effective tourism development strategies.

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CHALLENGES OF ACADEMIC MOBILITY IN BRAZILIAN DOMESTIC TOURISM: TRAVEL THE JOURNEY TO THE ANPTUR 2026 SEMINAR IN MACAPÁ (AP)

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the challenges and opportunities of Brazilian domestic tourism through the lens of academic mobility, focusing on travel to the ANPTUR 2026 Seminar held in Macapá (AP), a distinctive territory within the Brazilian Amazon. In continental countries such as Brazil, internal mobility is shaped by territorial inequalities and structural conditions of access that affect not only leisure tourism but also participation in scientific and academic events. The study analyzes air travel conditions faced by researchers departing from the North and Northeast regions of Brazil, considering flight routes, number of connections, total journey time, and average airfare costs in order to assess their implications for equity in access to the production and circulation of knowledge. From a methodological perspective, the study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach, based on travel simulations conducted on digital booking platforms and publicly available institutional data. The findings are presented in comparative tables and interpreted in relation to the literature on domestic tourism, mobility, and regional inequalities. The results reveal limited air connectivity, a lack of direct flights from most of the departure cities analyzed, multiple layovers, and high travel costs, making travel itself a central component of the event experience. The study argues that while the territorial decentralization of scientific events carries relevant political and symbolic value, it must be accompanied by institutional strategies aimed at accessibility in order to avoid reproducing historical barriers. The study concludes that examining domestic tourism in the Amazon requires attention to mobility, territorial justice, and the democratization of science knowledge.*

KEYWORDS: *Domestic tourism; academic mobility; territorial inequalities; Amazon; air accessibility.*

INTRODUCTION

Domestic tourism, understood as the set of activities undertaken by individuals traveling for tourism purposes within their own country of residence (United Nations & World Tourism Organization, 2010), plays a significant role in shaping territorial development, mobility, and the democratization of access to tourism experiences, particularly in countries with large territories. In national contexts marked by deep regional inequalities, such as Brazil (Silva & Araújo, 2022), traveling within the national territory may involve logistical, economic, and symbolic challenges comparable to, or even greater than, those associated with international travel. This condition makes domestic tourism a privileged field for examining the relationships between territory, infrastructure, circulation, and access.

In the academic sphere, these challenges become even more pronounced when considering the travel required to participate in scientific events. Conferences, seminars, and national academic meetings play a central role in knowledge production and circulation, the consolidation of research networks, and the training of researchers. Access to these spaces, however, is far from uniform and strongly shaped by the geographical location of institutions,

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the available transportation network, and the costs involved in travel.

In Brazil, these asymmetries become particularly evident when examining mobility flows from the North and Northeast regions to other parts of the country. The North Region, in particular, faces historical limitations related to transportation infrastructure, air connectivity, and the long distances between urban centers (BE News, 2026; Miranda; Silva, 2023). These factors directly affect the ability of researchers to participate in scientific events held at the national level.

In this context, the 2026 edition of the Seminar of the National Association for Research and Graduate Studies in Tourism (ANPTUR), to be held in Macapá, capital of the state of Amapá, offers an emblematic case for analyzing the challenges and opportunities of domestic tourism associated with academic mobility. More than a scientific meeting, the event proposes an immersive experience that brings together science, territory, culture, and local engagement, repositioning the Amazon region at the center of academic debate in tourism studies.

The choice of Macapá as the host city, a place marked by geographical, cultural, and symbolic particularities, highlights both the transformative potential of decentralizing scientific events and the concrete obstacles faced by researchers from other regions of the country in accessing this territory. Travel characterized by multiple flight connections, long journey times, and high financial costs becomes part of the event experience itself, constituting a core dimension of the domestic tourism experienced by participants.

Given this scenario, the overall objective of this study is to analyze the challenges of academic mobility in Brazilian domestic tourism, drawing on the travel undertaken by researchers from the Northeast and North regions of Brazil to attend the ANPTUR 2026 Seminar in Macapá (AP). The specific objectives are to: (i) map the air travel options available from João Pessoa (Paraíba), Recife (Pernambuco), and Manaus (Amazonas) as points of origin; (ii) compare travel costs, journey times, and the number of connections; and (iii) reflect on how these conditions affect academic participation and the overall event experience, with the Amazon region serving as a central analytical reference.

The choice of this event as the object of analysis is justified by its national relevance in the field of tourism studies and by its location in a territory historically marked by challenges related to accessibility and mobility.

By articulating domestic tourism, academic mobility, and territorial experience, this study contributes to the international debate on inequalities of access in continental countries, offering a situated reading of the Brazilian Amazon while highlighting the need for policies and institutional strategies that promote greater equity in the circulation of scientific knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach. The methodological design was structured around two complementary components: the development of a theoretical framework and the collection of empirical data through travel market simulations.

The theoretical foundation was established through a bibliographic survey conducted using the Google Scholar and SciELO databases. The combined descriptors "Domestic Tourism", "Academic Mobility", "Territorial Inequalities", and "Amazon" were applied. This process resulted in a corpus of 11 works, including peer-reviewed journal articles and classic reference books relevant to the study.

The methodological procedures also involved identifying the main cities of origin of the researchers, considering representative capital cities in the Northeast and North regions of Brazil. From these locations, air travel simulations to the city of Macapá were conducted using

digital airline ticket search platforms and the official websites of airlines operating domestic routes in Brazil, including Decolar, Latam, Gol, and Azul.

For each simulation, data were collected on the number of connections required, total journey time including layovers; and the average cost of economy-class airfare. Prices were based on regular fares, excluding promotional periods and peak demand dates. The data were organized into comparative tables, enabling a clear visualization of differences across the analyzed routes.

In addition, institutional documents related to the event, official promotional materials, and publicly available information on air transportation infrastructure in the North Region of Brazil were examined to contextualize the empirical findings and relate them to broader territorial and structural conditions. Data analysis followed an interpretive approach, linking the empirical results to the theoretical framework on domestic tourism, mobility, and territorial inequalities. As noted by Creswell (2007), interpretive analysis involves describing observed phenomena and examining them in light of the researcher's understanding informed by the relevant literature.

Although this study does not aim to statistically measure travel demand, the adopted methodology allows for a consistent assessment of how travel costs and journey times affect academic participation and the overall event experience. In doing so, it contributes to broader reflections on accessibility, the decentralization of scientific events, and domestic tourism dynamics in Amazonian contexts.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the location of the city of Macapá (Amapá) in Brazil, highlighting the simulated air routes from capital cities in the North and Northeast regions. The map illustrates the lack of direct flights and the reliance on connecting flights, factors that contribute to longer journey times and higher travel costs.

Figure 1. Location of Macapá (AP) within Brazil and simulated air routes from the North and Northeast regions.

Source: *Authors' elaboration with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools (2026).*

The analysis of air travel undertaken by researchers from the Northeast and North regions of Brazil to Macapá, the host city of the ANPTUR 2026 Seminar, reveals a set of logistical and financial challenges that directly affect academic mobility in the context of domestic tourism. Travel simulations conducted from representative capital cities in these regions indicate recurring patterns of limited connectivity, multiple layovers, and extended total journey times.

Overall, none of the capital cities analyzed, João Pessoa (Paraíba), Recife (Pernambuco), and Manaus (Amazonas), offered direct flights to Macapá, making at least one layover necessary in all cases. This lack of direct connectivity leads to higher travel costs and longer total journey times. Departures from Northeast capitals, particularly Recife and João Pessoa, tend to involve more indirect and longer routes, often with two or more layovers in major air hubs such as São Paulo (Guarulhos/Congonhas) or Brasília. By contrast, departures from Manaus, due to its geographical proximity to Macapá, generally involve fewer connections and lower average fares than those originating in the Northeast. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 1, geographical proximity alone does not guarantee lower airfare.

The fares presented should be understood as estimates based on market research conducted on booking platforms such as Skyscanner, Trip.com, Kayak, and Expedia. Actual prices for the specific event date (September 21, 2026) may vary and should be confirmed directly through the respective booking platforms.

Table 1: Estimated flight costs to Macapá/AP – September 21, 2026 (one way)

Origin	**Airline company / Platform**	**Estimated layovers**	**Estimated one-way cost Ida (R$)***	**Estimated cost (round-trip cost)**	**Total flight time**	**Total travel time (including connections)**	**Comments**
Recife (REC)	Gol / LATAM / Azul	1–2	~ R$ 1.500 – 2.500	~R$ 2.000 - R$ 2.800	6h30–7h30	8–12h	No direct flights; common connection via Belém, Brasília, or São Paulo.
João Pessoa (JPA)	LATAM / Azul / Gol	2+	~ R$ 1.900 – 2.800	~R$ 2.400 – R$ 3.400	7h–8h	10–14h	Route with multiple layovers and less competition tend to have higher fares.
Manaus (MAO)	LATAM / Azul / Gol	1	~ R$ 800 – 1.600	~R$ 1.800 – R$ 2.600	2h30–3h	4–6h	Lower fares than those from the Northeast; connections typically occur in Belém or Brasília.

Source: Data obtained from the websites of LATAM Airlines, Gol Linhas Aéreas, JetSMART Airlines, and Decolar on February 13, 2026. Authors' elaboration.

This configuration significantly increases total travel time, which can exceed 12 hours even for routes that, from a geographical perspective, do not involve long linear distances.

Regarding costs, average airfare varied considerably depending on the city of origin and the number of required connections. In many cases, domestic travel costs exceeded those of short- and medium-haul international flights, creating a paradoxical situation in which domestic tourism becomes more expensive than international travel. This comparison is shown in Table 2, which simulates travel to Argentina during the same period.

Table 2: Estimated prices for round-trip tickets to Argentina – September 21, 2026, to September 26, 2026.

Origin	Airline company / Typical route	Estimated layovers	Estimated cost (R$)*	Comments
Recife (REC)	JetSMART / GOL / LATAM	0–1 layover	**~R$ 1.600 – R$ 2.300**	Fares identified through search tools indicate prices starting at approximately R$1,595 (round-trip, historical data).
João Pessoa (JPA)	LATAM / GOL com conexão (possível via Recife ou São Paulo)	1–2 layover	**~R$ 2.200 – R$ 3.000**	A general price reference from a survey round indicated approximately US$426 (approximately R$2,200).
Manaus (MAO)	LATAM / GOL / others (connections)	1 layover	**~R$ 1.800 – R$ 2.700**	The estimate is based on typical fares for comparable South American flights and tends to be < Northeast ↔ Bahia.

Source: Data obtained from the websites of LATAM Airlines, Gol Linhas Aéreas, JetSMART Airlines, and Decolar on February 13, 2026. Authors' elaboration.

Such conditions directly affect the feasibility of academic participation, particularly for researchers affiliated with public institutions, graduate students, and research groups with limited financial resources.

Another relevant aspect concerns the unpredictability of travel. Reliance on multiple connections increases exposure to delays, cancellations, and extended layovers, factors that intensify both physical and emotional fatigue among participants. As a result, travel time ceases to be merely a logistical consideration and becomes an integral part of the event experience, influencing participants' willingness to attend, remain engaged, and fully benefit from academic activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that travel to Macapá, even within Brazil, constitutes a complex journey marked by high costs, long travel times, and structural limitations in the Brazilian air transportation network, particularly in the North Region.

DISCUSSION

The findings enable a broader reflection on the contemporary challenges of domestic tourism in countries with large territories, such as Brazil. They demonstrate that internal mobility cannot be understood solely in terms of geographical proximity, but must also account for the concrete conditions of access and circulation. In the case analyzed, travel to the ANPTUR 2026 Seminar highlights territorial inequalities that affect both tourism and the circulation of scientific knowledge at the national level.

The complexity of travel routes, combined with high financial costs, indicates that participation in national scientific events does not occur under equitable conditions. Researchers based in regions with greater air connectivity tend to encounter fewer barriers to academic mobility, whereas those affiliated with peripheral territories, particularly in the North Region, face structural challenges that limit their participation in spaces of scholarly exchange and scientific visibility. From this perspective, academic mobility emerges less as a universal opportunity and more as a privilege shaped by territorial conditions.

At the same time, holding the ANPTUR 2026 Seminar in Macapá represents a meaningful symbolic departure from the historical concentration of scientific events in the South-Southeast axis. The choice of the capital of Amapá as the host city reaffirms the Amazon as a legitimate site of knowledge production and not merely as an object of study. However, the results indicate that geographical decentralization alone is insufficient to guarantee effective accessibility. Policies and strategic measures aimed at reducing travel costs and journey times are therefore essential to ensure broader and more equitable participation.

From the perspective of domestic tourism, the travel itineraries analyzed represent an experience that goes beyond the purely instrumental function of travel. In this context, the arrival in Macapá is preceded by a journey that intensifies perceptions of the Amazonian territory as a distant and distinctive space that is, at the same time, deeply connected to national dynamics.

Moreover, the immersive nature of the event reinforces the idea that science, tourism, and culture are closely intertwined in the territory. Engagement with the place, its rhythms, landscapes, flavors, and social encounters, becomes an integral part of the processes of knowledge production and circulation. This expanded experience, however, is accessible only to those who can overcome the logistical and financial barriers associated with travel, reinforcing the need for critical reflection on equity and inclusion in the organization of scientific events.

Thus, the analysis of travel to the ANPTUR 2026 Seminar makes it possible to understand domestic tourism not only as a leisure activity but as a strategic domain for discussing mobility, access, and territorial justice. By drawing attention to the challenges faced by researchers from the North and Northeast regions of Brazil, this study contributes to the international debate on scientific circulation in peripheral contexts, pointing to the urgency of public and institutional policies aimed at promoting greater balance in the spatial distribution of academic events and access to scholarly opportunities.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study examined the challenges of academic mobility in Brazilian domestic tourism by analyzing the travel of researchers from the North and Northeast regions to participate in the ANPTUR 2026 Seminar, held in Macapá (AP). Using the event as an empirical case, the analysis highlighted how internal mobility in a country of continental dimensions is deeply shaped by territorial inequalities, infrastructure limitations, and high travel costs.

The findings indicate that, although formally situated in the scope of domestic tourism, travel to the North Region involves complex logistics, including multiple air connections, extended travel times, and substantial financial investments. These conditions directly affect academic participation and reveal that access to spaces for the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge is not equitably distributed across the national territory.

The discussion highlights that academic mobility should not be understood merely as an individual choice, but rather as a structural phenomenon shaped by transportation policies, institutional decisions, and longstanding dynamics of territorial centralization. In this context, the ANPTUR 2026 Seminar in Macapá represents a relevant symbolic and political step toward scientific decentralization, repositioning the Amazon as a site of academic exchange, debate, and lived experience. However, the study demonstrates that territorial decentralization must be accompanied by strategies to enhance accessibility; otherwise, existing inequalities risk being reproduced.

By bringing together domestic tourism, academic mobility, and territorial experience, this study contributes to the international debate by offering a situated perspective on the Amazonian context, which remains relatively underexplored outside Brazil. The analysis of travel shows that domestic tourism, particularly in peripheral contexts, involves not only physical displacement but also symbolic, temporal, and economic crossings that shape the researcher-traveler experience.

Finally, the study points to the need for public and institutional policies that recognize academic mobility as a strategic dimension of scientific development, especially in countries with large territories. Incentives for participation in decentralized events, financial support for

travel, and the strengthening of regional air connectivity are measures that can promote more equitable knowledge circulation. By highlighting Macapá as a scientific and experiential territory, this study reinforces the importance of understanding domestic tourism beyond leisure, recognizing it as a key arena for the democratization of science and the valorization of Amazonian territories.

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ACCESSIBLE TOURISM: SOME RECENT ITALIAN EXPERIENCES*

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ABSTRACT: *In recent years, accessible tourism has become an important theme for social inclusion and a lever for competitiveness, differentiation, and the sustainable development of tourist destinations. Despite the expansion of the literature, two critical issues persist from a managerial perspective. First of all, the limited availability of operating models that translate accessibility principles into concrete organisational practices. There is also the persistence of information asymmetries that hinder the decision-making processes of tourists with disabilities. This paper addresses both gaps by presenting a recent Italian experience: the social cooperative "Cosy For You – Tour Per Tutti", operating in Campania (a southern region), which designs inclusive itineraries through an organisational model called D.A.M.A. (Destination Accessibility Management & Marketing Agency). The research adopts a qualitative methodology based on case studies and reconstructs the model's functioning, focusing on accessibility auditing procedures, verification data sheets, coordination with territorial stakeholders, and the use of immersive digital content to reduce information asymmetry. The results show that the model analysed enables integrating economic purposes and a social mission within a hybrid governance logic, offering a replicable operational framework for managing accessibility across different destinations. The contribution strengthens the managerial literature on accessible tourism by showing how accessibility, when governed with appropriate tools, can be configured as a factor in value creation and inclusive territorial development.*

KEYWORDS: *accessible tourism; destination management; social enterprise; information asymmetry; quality assurance; inclusive tourism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of accessibility in tourism has gone beyond a reductive vision confined to the welfare dimension or regulatory compliance, taking on broader importance in the debate on sustainable development and the competitiveness of destinations. In this perspective, accessible tourism concerns not only the presence or absence of physical barriers, but also the entire capacity of the tourism system to offer usable, reliable, and dignified experiences to a plurality of users with special needs (Darcy, 2009; Buhalis, 2010).

The international literature increasingly shows that accessibility is a structural component of the quality of the tourist offer and, more broadly, of the economic and social sustainability of destinations (Darcy et al., 2010; Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Demographic ageing, increased awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities, and the growing attention to inclusive models of development have made it clear that accessible tourism is not a marginal segment but a transversal dimension of contemporary demand (Darcy, 2020).

Despite this evolution, the concrete implementation of accessibility in tourism systems continues to pose significant challenges. Many destinations, especially Italian ones (Agovino, 2017), have cultural, natural and receptive resources that are potentially suitable for inclusive use but are unable to transform them into a truly accessible offer due to organisational

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* *The article is the result of the collaboration between the two authors. However, it is necessary to specify that Vittorio Lepre is the main operator of the company "Cosy For You" which is carrying out the project described in the paper. He is therefore responsible for the description of the business case proposed in the paragraph «The "Cosy For You" - Tour Per Tutti» case and the "D.A.M.A" model, with its seven subparagraphs. Guido Migliaccio, on the other hand, carried out the bibliographical analysis and translated the business case into scientific reflection. The other paragraphs are therefore attributable to him. Artificial intelligence tools were used for the drafting and translation of texts.*

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limitations, coordination weaknesses and information gaps. In other words, the problem lies not only in the availability of adequate infrastructure, but also in the ability to govern accessibility as a managerial process.

On this point, two particularly significant gaps emerge.

a) The first concerns the scarcity of *operational management models* capable of translating theoretical guidelines into clear, replicable and monitorable organisational protocols. The literature has extensively discussed the link between accessibility, competitiveness, and destination development, but has less frequently developed prescriptive management architectures that can be concretely applied by companies and destination managers (Domínguez Vila et al., 2015; Nyanjom & Pforr, 2018).

b) The second gap concerns the persistent *information asymmetry* that characterises the planning of the trip by tourists with disabilities. The problem of accessibility, in fact, does not end with the actual usability of places, but decisively affects the quality, detail and reliability of the information made available before the trip. Numerous contributions have shown that information uncertainty is one of the main deterrents to tourist mobility, as it exposes the traveller to the risk of finding conditions different from those declared or expected (Darcy, 2010a; Michopoulou et al., 2015).

This study is part of this research space and offers a managerial contribution with the analysis of a recent Italian experience developed in Campania by the social cooperative "*Cosy For You – Tour Per Tutti"*. The organisation has developed an operating model called *D.A.M.A. (Destination Accessibility Management & Marketing Agency),* aimed at integrating technical verification, structured information, territorial coordination and promotion of the accessible offer.

The objective of the study is twofold.

a) We want to analyse a hybrid governance model, promoted by a social enterprise, which can support the management of accessibility in the different destinations.

b) It shows how quality assurance procedures and immersive digital tools can contribute to reducing information asymmetry and increasing the tourist's pre-trip confidence.

The paper first summarises the main theoretical references on accessible tourism and information asymmetry, and then illustrates the methodological approach. This is followed by the presentation of the "Cosy For You - Tour Per Tutti" case and the functioning of its D.A.M.A. model. Finally, the results are discussed, and the managerial and research implications are highlighted.

2. ACCESSIBLE TOURISM, GOVERNANCE AND INFORMATION ASYMMETRY

The literature on accessible tourism is developing, with a significant theoretical maturation. The evolution records the transition from studies centred on disability as an individual characteristic to a perspective that interprets inaccessibility as the result of a problematic interaction among the subject, the environment, and the organisation of the service.

In this framework, the so-called *social model of disability* has shifted the focus from personal limitations to physical, informational and attitudinal barriers that prevent full participation in the tourist experience (Darcy, 2009). This theoretical shift has also produced an important consequence for management studies: accessibility is no longer considered an isolated attribute of individual structures, but a systemic property of the destination and its service chain. The tourist experience, in fact, depends on the continuity of use along the entire journey: information, booking, transport, reception, local mobility, visit, catering, and support services. It only takes one weak link to compromise the value of the entire experience (Devile

& Kastenholz, 2018).

In this perspective, some studies have highlighted the link between accessibility and *a destination's competitiveness*. Accessibility improves the perceived quality of the offer, expands the potential market, and strengthens the destination's positioning on inclusion and sustainability. Consequently, it cannot be interpreted only as a regulatory obligation, but as a strategic component of tourism management (Domínguez Vila et al., 2015).

At the same time, a significant body of literature has shown that the main critical issues do not depend solely on infrastructure investments. Equally significant obstacles derive from the fragmentation of responsibilities, the weakness of coordination between stakeholders and the absence of shared accessibility management protocols (Nyanjom & Pforr, 2018). Accessibility, in other words, requires a form of governance capable of integrating public actors, tourism companies, civil society organisations and disability representatives.

A further theoretical issue concerns the role of information. For tourists with disabilities, pre-trip uncertainty carries particular weight, since the genericity or unreliability of information can result in costs, inconvenience, exclusion, and the failure of the tourist experience. Darcy (2010a) has convincingly shown that the information preferences of travellers with disabilities are strongly oriented towards timely, verifiable, and context-specific data, rather than towards generic statements of accessibility.

From this perspective, the issue of information asymmetry is central. The tour operator often has superior knowledge of the actual accessibility conditions of his structure, while the tourist is forced to decide with incomplete information. If the information disseminated online is superficial, poorly standardised, or uncontrolled, the perceived risk increases and the propensity to travel decreases (Michopoulou et al., 2015; Domínguez Vila & Darcy, 2025).

The most recent literature has suggested that digital technologies can help mitigate this problem. Advanced information platforms, immersive content and tools for the visual representation of the experience can increase transparency and improve the tourist's ability to assess ex ante the compatibility of the service with their needs (Teixeira et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of these tools depends on the quality of the process that feeds them. In the absence of technical verifications, even the most advanced technologies risk reproducing inaccurate information in a more sophisticated form.

In light of these considerations, the point is not simply to "communicate" accessibility, but *to govern* and *certify it* through consistent organisational procedures.

It is in this space that the interest of the case analysed here lies.

3. METHODOLOGY

The work adopts a qualitative approach based on a *single case study*. This methodological option appears consistent with the research objective, which is not to measure generalisable causal relationships but to reconstruct in depth an innovative organisational model and understand its management logic.

The selected case concerns the social cooperative "*Cosy For You – Tour Per Tutti"*, founded in Naples in 2014 and active in the accessible tourism sector. The choice of the case is motivated by three reasons.

1) First, the organisation operates as a *social enterprise*, and therefore constitutes a particularly useful context for observing the tension and integration between economic logic and social mission.

2) Secondly, the cooperative has developed a formalised operating model, the D.A.M.A., which allows accessibility to be analysed not in abstract terms, but as a set of procedures, standards and control tools.

3) Thirdly, the case is placed in a territorial context, that of inland Campania, a region in the south of Italy, which is less explored by international literature than other mature destinations.

The analysis is based on the reconstruction of the organisational model, its verification protocols and its experimental applications in the inland areas of Sannio and Irpinia. In particular, attention was paid to four profiles: the initiative's governance structure; the technical auditing process for the structures; the production and management of accessibility information; and the role of operational tests in validating itineraries.

The purpose of the case study is therefore eminently interpretative and managerial: to highlight how an organisational subject can structure accessibility as a process rather than a simple statement of principle.

4. THE "COSY FOR YOU" CASE AND THE "D.A.M.A." MODEL

4.1. Organisation profile and strategic logic

"Cosy For You – Tour Per Tutti" is a social cooperative that operates as a travel agency and tour operator specialising in the design of inclusive experiences for people with disabilities and, more generally, for people with specific accessibility needs. The initiative originates from the experience of the "Peepul Onlus" association, which it inherits, and from which it inherits a non-welfare vision of inclusion: not an approach centred on the "special need" as an exception, but on the ordinary right to full participation in travel and leisure experiences.

The cooperative is located in a particular segment of tourism: one in which the creation of economic value is closely linked to the ability to remove obstacles to access to services. In this configuration, value is not generated solely by the sale of a tourist package, but by the ability to organise a chain of services into a coherent, predictable, and usable whole.

In the case of Campania, the orientation is intertwined with a further territorial objective: to enhance the most consolidated coastal tourist poles and, above all, the inland areas, often rich in cultural, environmental and religious heritage but less structured in terms of accessibility and promotion. In this sense, the cooperative interprets accessibility as a lever for social inclusion and, at the same time, for local development.

4.2. The D.A.M.A. model: structure and functions

To give operational form to this vision, "Cosy For You - Tour Per Tutti" has developed the "*D.A.M.A. (Destination Accessibility Management & Marketing Agency)*" model. It is an accessibility management framework that combines four dimensions:

a) technical analysis of the conditions of use,

b) construction of information standards,

c) stakeholder coordination,

d) promotion of an accessible offer.

The model is divided into a multi-step process that includes resource mapping, monitoring, selection of facilities and services, feasibility checks, operational tests, validation, publication of information and collection of feedback.

More than a simple technical procedure, the D.A.M.A. is presented as a real architecture of *destination management of accessibility*, in which the marketing function is subordinated to the quality of the information and the consistency of the experience.

The basic idea is clear: an accessible tourist offer cannot be built on operators' self-declarations or summary information!

Instead, there is a need for a process to qualify the offer, in which accessibility is observed, measured, documented, and, as far as possible, tested.

4.3. The technical audit and accessibility sheets

The model's operational core lies in the *on-site technical verification process*. The structures and services that aspire to enter the accessible offer circuit are subjected to targeted inspections aimed at identifying the most sensitive elements for people with disabilities. The focus is on gates, accesses, slopes, manoeuvring spaces, toilets, available aids, internal paths, times of use and possible compensatory solutions.

The outcome of this activity is detailed accessibility sheets that include measurable data, analytical descriptions, and concrete guidance for accessing and using the spaces. This step is decisive from a managerial point of view because it transforms information that is often vague and binary ("accessible/non-accessible structure") into a much richer representation, useful to both the tourist and the operator.

For the tourist, the card reduces uncertainty and enables a more autonomous and informed assessment of the compatibility between the offer and the need.

For the operator, however, it is a tool for diagnosis and, in perspective, for improvement.

In other words, information on accessibility does not only have a communicative function, but also a *management control function*: it makes critical issues visible at a given moment, allows micro-interventions to be planned, and promotes a logic of continuous improvement.

This approach appears consistent with the literature, which has underlined that, in accessible tourism, the fundamental problem is not only the availability of infrastructure but also the availability of reliable, detailed information on concrete ways of use (Darcy, 2010a).

4.4. Quality assurance and operational support

The model does not end with the initial technical survey. To ensure consistency between the information widely disseminated and the actual quality of the experience, "Cosy For You - Tour Per Tutti" has developed an articulated quality assurance protocol that includes pre-briefing sessions, on-site checks, assistance during the most delicate steps of the experience, and a final debriefing.

This attention to the executive phase is particularly relevant. In practice, even a formally suitable structure can generate critical issues if staff are not trained, services are not coordinated, or uncommunicated variations occur. The accompanying protocol reduces this risk and keeps design, communication, and use aligned.

Here, too, a typically corporate logic emerges: accessibility is not treated as a static state, but as a *process to be overseen*, in which control, verification and feedback play an essential role. In this sense, the D.A.M.A. model brings the issue of accessibility closer to the traditional logic of management control applied to service quality.

4.5. Immersive technologies and reduction of information asymmetry

A further distinctive element of the case concerns the use of *immersive digital content*, in particular 360° videos and tools similar to *virtual reality*. The shots are taken from a wheelchair-friendly perspective and aim to give potential tourists a concrete preview of the environment, the obligatory passages, the manoeuvring spaces, and the key points.

From a theoretical point of view, this choice is particularly interesting because it directly connects two strands of the literature: the one on information asymmetry in accessible tourism and the one on the potential of digital technologies as a support for inclusion (Michopoulou et al., 2015; Migliaccio, 2016; Teixeira et al., 2025). However, in the model examined, technology is not treated as a stand-alone solution. Its value lies in its integration into a preliminary technical verification process. Immersive representation, therefore, does not replace control: it makes it more usable and useful to the final recipient.

This makes it possible to overcome a frequent criticality in tourism information systems, in which the digitisation of information does not necessarily coincide with its qualitative improvement. In the D.A.M.A. case, on the contrary, technology and *quality assurance* appear to be closely integrated.

4.6. Territorial experiments in inland Campania

The model has been applied and tested in various initiatives developed in the inland areas of Campania, with particular reference to *Sannio* and *Irpinia*. These territories constitute an interesting context because, although they have significant cultural, religious, and landscape resources, they are not always included in accessible, continuous tourist circuits.

The experiments involved inclusive *short breaks* organised for small groups, with a defined logistical base and a structured path along a chain of selected services. This modality enabled observation not only of the individual accessibility of a site or structure, but also of the *continuity of use* throughout the entire experience.

The tests have highlighted specific criticalities, but these are often solvable with modest interventions: mobile ramps, minor adjustments, improvements to toilets, alternative routes, and greater continuity in equipped transport. This figure is relevant because it shows that accessibility, at least in some contexts, does not depend solely on large investments but on a combination of careful observation, intelligent design, and operational coordination.

The experiments also produced a territorial learning effect. Through dialogue with operators, institutions, and associations, the cooperative has taken on a directing and facilitating role, contributing to the construction of a local network more attuned to the requirements of inclusive hospitality.

4.7. Training and organisational impact

A further axis of the initiative concerns the *training* of operators and the strengthening of local skills. Accessibility, in fact, does not end with the technical dimension of the spaces. An important part of the service's quality depends on staff behaviour, the ability to anticipate needs, relational sensitivity, and mastery of procedures.

For this reason, the model includes training activities for players in the supply chain and, at the same time, pathways to work inclusion that strengthen the coherence between the social mission and economic operations. The social enterprise is thus configured not only as a service provider, but also as an entity capable of generating organisational learning and relational capital on the territory.

5. DISCUSSION

The case analysed allows us to formulate some theoretical and managerial considerations.

Firstly, it confirms that accessible tourism can only be convincingly interpreted as *a problem of organisation and governance*, not simply as an infrastructural issue. The D.A.M.A. model shows that accessibility results from a coordinated set of activities: information collection, on-site verifications, standardisation, quality control, operational tests, data updating, and operator training. In the absence of this direction, accessibility remains fragmented.

Secondly, the case offers a concrete answer to the issue of *information asymmetry*. The literature has amply shown that tourists with disabilities attach decisive value to the accuracy of pre-trip information. The model examined here addresses this problem through a double mechanism: on the one hand, the production of objective and measurable information; on the other, the use of immersive tools that make the information more intelligible and verifiable from the user's point of view. This combination appears particularly effective because it

combines technical rigour and communicative usability.

Thirdly, the experience of "Cosy For You - Tour Per Tutti" suggests that the *social enterprise* can perform a function particularly suitable for the management of tourist accessibility. The reason is twofold: it has a value legitimacy consistent with the pursuit of inclusion, and it operates according to entrepreneurial logics that orient it towards economic sustainability and organisational effectiveness. The result is a form of *hybrid governance* that seems to respond well to the needs of accessible tourism, a sector in which economic objectives and social purposes are not easily separable.

From a managerial perspective, the case suggests that destinations interested in enhancing accessibility should intervene in at least four elements:

a) definition of observable standards;

b) construction of reliable information systems;

c) inter-organisational coordination;

d) investment in skills.

Accessibility, therefore, should not be governed solely by building regulations or interventions, but also by control tools, verification protocols, and territorial learning processes.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper analysed a recent Italian experience of accessible tourism, focusing on the D.A.M.A. model developed by the social cooperative "Cosy For You - Tour Per Tutti" in Campania, an Italian region. The interest of the case lies in its ability to translate a widely shared principle, accessibility as a right and as a factor of competitiveness, into a coherent set of organisational practices.

The results show that the analysed model constitutes a credible operational framework for accessibility management at the target level. It integrates technical auditing, structured information production, quality assurance, field experimentation, stakeholder coordination and targeted use of immersive technologies. In this way, it offers a concrete response to both the lack of prescriptive management models and the persistent information asymmetry that affects the behaviour of tourists with disabilities.

The paper, of course, presents the typical limitations of a *single case study*. The territorial specificity of Campania, the qualitative nature of the analysis, and the still-evolving nature of the experience suggest caution in generalising the results. Precisely for this reason, however, the case appears useful as a basis for broader future developments, aimed at comparing similar models, building impact metrics, and verifying more systematically the relationship between the quality of information, pre-trip trust, and propensity for tourist mobility.

The contribution intends above all to underline that, in accessible tourism, accessibility does not coincide with the mere removal of the physical barrier, but with the construction of an offer system capable of being reliable, readable and coordinated. When this happens, accessibility ceases to appear as a cost of compliance and reveals itself, more properly, as a form of managerial innovation and inclusive territorial development.

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ACCESSIBILITY IN TOURISM FOR OLDER ADULTS: A STUDY OF BARS, RESTAURANTS, AND TOURIST ATTRACTIONS IN AREIA AND BANANEIRAS (PARAÍBA, BRAZIL)

Felipe Chagas [1], Adriana Brambilla[2], Elídio Vanzella[3]

ABSTRACT: *The state of Paraíba has become one of the most sought-after tourist destinations among Brazilians. Although it is widely known for sun-and-beach tourism, some regions of the state have gained prominence among visitors seeking alternative tourism experiences. One such region is the Brejo Paraibano, particularly the cities of Areia and Bananeiras, which are the focus of this study. These cities present climatic conditions that differ from those found in most parts of the state. Located in mountainous areas, they experience milder temperatures compared with much of Paraíba, where high temperatures prevail throughout the year. In addition, Areia and Bananeiras are known for their rich natural and cultural heritage, including Atlantic Forest reserves, waterfalls, and hiking trails, as well as important historical landmarks such as the Minerva Theater in Areia, the first theater built in the state of Paraíba. The selection of these cities is related to their distinctive climatic characteristics, which attract older visitors. Due to their milder temperatures, in contrast to the hotter conditions typical of many cities in northeastern Brazil, older tourists often seek these destinations in search of more comfortable climatic conditions. In this context, the main objective of this study is to analyze the accessibility conditions of tourist attractions and food and beverage establishments in the cities of Areia and Bananeiras, Paraíba, in order to assess whether they meet the needs of older adults.*

Keywords: *Accessibility, Bars and Restaurants, Tourism, Older adults, Brejo Paraibano.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has increasingly become one of the most important sectors in Brazil from both economic and social perspectives, demonstrating significant growth that is evident in everyday life. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2026), domestic tourism activity increased by 4.6% in 2025 compared with 2024.

The growth of tourism is a phenomenon that continues to expand, reaching a wide range of audiences, particularly due to the increasing demand for more specialized segments such as adventure tourism, cultural tourism, sun-and-beach tourism, and senior tourism. The latter has gained increasing attention, focusing on people aged 60 and over. One of the factors that encourages travel among this group is their greater availability of time and financial resources. In addition, according to the Ministry of Tourism News Agency (2022), people aged 60 and older account for approximately 15% of domestic tourists in Brazil.

According to 2025 data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, Brazil has 32.9 million older adults, representing approximately 15.8% of the population. These figures indicate the number of older adults in Brazil has more than doubled over the past 15 years. This trend is largely due to technological advances in the health sector, which have contributed to increased life expectancy. The rise in life expectancy has important implications for several sectors, including tourism, as it contributes to growing demand for tourism-related activities. According to projections from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2024), by 2070 approximately 37.8% of the population will be composed of individuals aged 60 and over; in other words, one out of every three Brazilians will be over the age of 60.

Among the Brazilian states, Paraíba, the focus of this study, has gained both national

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and international recognition as a tourist destination. João Pessoa, the state capital, was listed among the most sought-after destinations in the world for 2025 according to Booking.com (2024) and Time Out Travel (2024). In 2023, the state recorded 320,000 domestic trips, a figure 56% higher than that reported in 2021, according to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (2024) in partnership with the Brazilian Ministry of Tourism. These figures indicate the state of Paraíba has become an important destination in Brazil's domestic tourism landscape and is now well established in the national market.

Paraíba is one of the nine states that constitute Brazil's Northeast and is divided into four mesoregions: Zona da Mata, Borborema, Agreste, and Sertão. Zona da Mata corresponds to the state's coastal zone, including several biomes, such as the Atlantic Forest, mangroves, and restingas (coastal sandy vegetation). One of its main characteristics is its hot and humid climate, which predominates throughout the year, with temperatures often exceeding 30°C. Borborema is known for having the highest elevations in the state and for its highly variable climate, influenced by both coastal humidity and the dry conditions of the Sertão. Latitude also contributes to these climatic variations. The Sertão is the region farthest from the state capital, João Pessoa, and has one of the hottest and driest climates in the state. These climatic conditions continue to affect the quality of life of the local population. The Agreste is the region where the Brejo Paraibano is located (Duarte & Guilhermino, 2018), an area that includes the cities of Areia and Bananeiras, which are the focus of this study. This region lies between Zona da Mata and Borborema and therefore functions as a transitional zone, presenting characteristics that differ from those found in other parts of the state, such as cooler temperatures that can drop to around 12°C, which is relatively uncommon in northeastern Brazil. The region also features extensive green landscapes and distinctive geographic characteristics, including mountainous terrain, mountain ranges, and plateaus (Duarte & Guilhermino, 2018).

Although the climatic and geographic characteristics of these cities are among their most notable features, they also possess a wide range of cultural and historical heritage sites, including centuries-old churches, museums, historic mansions, theaters, and traditional sugar mills. The first theater in the state was built in Areia. The city also played an important role in the struggle for the abolition of slavery, becoming the first municipality in Brazil to abolish it (Andrade, 1997). Both cities have heritage sites that have received official preservation status. In 2006, the historic and urban complex of Areia was listed by the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage, and in 2010 the architectural heritage of Bananeiras, consisting of several historic buildings, was listed by the Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage of the State of Paraíba (Paraíba, 2019). In addition, the region is known for its rich gastronomy and handicrafts, which are highlighted during local fairs and festivals, particularly the Rota Cultural Caminhos do Frio. The festival takes place in ten cities across the state and attracts a large number of tourists to Paraíba. The event originated in Bananeiras in 2006, when it was held exclusively in that municipality. Currently, the route begins in Areia and continues through other municipalities from June 30 to September 7, the period with the lowest temperatures in the state. These factors highlight the economic and social importance of these cities within Paraíba, as they feature a rich cultural, gastronomic, historical, natural, geographic, and architectural heritage (Duarte & Guilhermino, 2018).

Given the information presented, this study aims to examine whether the cities of the Brejo Paraibano region, specifically Areia and Bananeiras, are prepared to accommodate the growing number of visitors discovering the state of Paraíba, with particular attention to older adults, as this group often requires specific conditions and adaptations to ensure a high-quality tourism experience.

METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as exploratory and descriptive, using both quantitative and qualitative analyses. To achieve this objective, bibliographic research was conducted using scientific articles, books, and legislation addressing accessibility, older adults, senior tourism, cultural tourism, and gastronomic tourism.

In addition, documentary research was conducted using technical standards and current legislation related to accessibility. The main sources included ABNT NBR 9050:2020 from the Brazilian Association of Technical Standards (2020), the Statute of the Elderly (Brazil, 2003), the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, Law No. 8,842 (Brazil, 1994), and the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (Brazil, 2015). This review of standards and legislation was fundamental to the development of the research instrument, namely a checklist applied to the establishments and attractions included in the study. After developing the checklist, food and beverage establishments to be analyzed (bars and restaurants) were identified through a search of Cadastur (Register of Tourism Service Providers), maintained by the Brazilian Ministry of Tourism, in January 2026. Tourist attractions in the respective cities were also identified using Tripadvisor and Google Maps in February 2026.

To identify tourist attractions, searches were conducted on two websites, Google Maps and Tripadvisor, to determine which attractions were most sought after based on the number of recommendations, reviews, and recorded visits. After identifying the most relevant attractions in each city according to these criteria on both platforms, an additional selection criterion was established: distance from the city center. Therefore, only attractions located within 10 km of the city center were included in the evaluation.

RESULTS

Regarding the survey of bars and restaurants, 10 establishments were selected in Areia and 22 in Bananeiras, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, totaling 32 establishments included in the study based on the criteria described in the methodology.

Table 1: Bars and restaurants registered in Cadastur in Areia, Paraíba, Brazil

Establishment	Category
Aroma da Serra	Restaurant
Churrascaria e Pizzaria do Brejo	Restaurant
Gostinho do Brejo	Bar
Matuto Adaptado - Restaurante e Petiscaria	Restaurant
Na'Creparia	Restaurant
O Barretão	Restaurant
Pizzaria Mello	Restaurant
Restaurante De'Lelis	Restaurant
Restaurante Rural Rio á Água Viva	Restaurant
Restaurante Rural Vó Maria	Restaurant

Table 2: Bars and restaurants registered in Cadastur in Bananeiras, Paraíba, Brazil

Establishment	Category
Rancho Country Music LTDA	Restaurant
Bavarias Haus	Restaurant
Bica dos Cocos	Restaurant
Bodega do Chef	Restaurant
Boteco da Serra	Restaurant
Casa Fuego	Restaurant
Dona Beta	Restaurant
Garp Grupo Agropecuário Recanto Do Picui	Restaurant
Grãos do Brejo	Restaurant
Lá Forneria Santos	Restaurant
Pizzaria Bom Sabor	Restaurant
Pizzaria Sabor da Serra	Restaurant
Prensas Bar	Bar
Recanto do Churrasco	Restaurant
Restaurante Gostinho Caseiro	Restaurant
Samambaia	Restaurant
Sampa 83 Bar	Bar
Seu João Pizzas	Restaurant
Sushi da Serra	Restaurant
Terraço Lisboa Bistrô	Restaurant
Tigela do Barro	Restaurant
Tre Sensi	Restaurant

A total of 15 tourist attractions were included in the study: 11 in Areia and 4 in Bananeiras (Tables 3 and 4).

Table3: Tourist Attractions in Areia, Paraíba, Brazil

Tourist attraction	Description
Engenho Triunfo	Located 2.6 km from the center of Areia, this distillery was founded in 1994 by Antônio Augusto Baracho and Maria Júlia Baracho. It currently operates as an ecotourism complex and is considered one of the main tourist attractions in the Brejo Paraibano region. The site offers guided tours of the production facilities with tastings and receives approximately 1,500 visitors per month. Visitors can also learn about the cachaça production process, and purchase products during the tour.
Parque Estadual Mata do Pau-Ferro (Mata do Pau-Ferro State Park)	Located 6.6 km from the city center, within the Atlantic Forest, Parque Estadual Mata do Pau-Ferro is an important ecological heritage site in Paraíba, covering approximately 600 hectares of the Vaca Brava area. The park has climatic conditions typical of the Brejo Paraibano region, with an average temperature of 22°C and relative humidity around 85%, and hosts significant plant and

	animal biodiversity.
Engenho Sabura	Located 6.1 km from the city center, this historic sugar mill features well-preserved centuries-old structures of historical and cultural significance. The site offers guided tours and tastings as part of the visitor experience.
Casarão José Rufino	Located 100 meters from the city center, this historic mansion was built in 1818 by the Portuguese landowner Francisco Jorge Torres. The building now functions as a museum, presenting historical information about slavery, the sugarcane production cycle, and artifacts from the period.
Museu do Brejo Paraibano (Brejo Paraibano Museum)	Located on the campus of the Federal University of Paraíba (Campus II), about 1.7 km from the city center, this museum is dedicated to the history of the sugarcane cycle. It preserves an 1843 manor house and a historic sugar mill illustrating nineteenth-century life in the region. The collection includes early industrial machinery from the period following the Industrial Revolution, rustic furniture, a wall clock more than 226 years old that still functions, traditional grinding stones, and other historical artifact.
Teatro Minerva (Minerva Theater)	Known as the first theater built in the state of Paraíba, the Teatro Minerva was inaugurated in 1859 and is located in the city center. The building features an Italian neoclassical architectural style with Greco-Roman influences, highlighted by the statue of the goddess Minerva on its facade.
Museu Casa de Pedro Américo (Casa de Pedro Américo Museum)	The museum dedicated to Pedro Américo, one of the most prominent painters in Brazilian history and the author of the famous painting *Independência ou morte (Independence or Death)*, popularly known as *O grito do Ipiranga* (*The Cry of Ipiranga)*, is located in the city center in the house where the artist spent his childhood. The museum displays works by the painter as well as a miniature representation of one of the most iconic paintings in Brazilian art.
Museu Regional de Areia (Regional Museum of Areia)	Located in the city center, the *Museu Regional de Areia* was founded in 1972 and reopened in 2012 after renovation. The museum houses an extensive collection of documents, photographs, and everyday objects that preserve the history, culture, sacred art, and heritage of the Brejo Paraibano region. Known as "MURA," its mission is to preserve and disseminate the historical memory of the region while promoting scientific and cultural activities.
Conjunto Histórico, Urbanístico	Listed by the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage in 2005–2006, the historic urban complex

e Paisagístico de Areia (Historic, Urban and Landscape Ensemble of Areia)	preserves approximately 420 buildings dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The area is characterized by eclectic and colonial architecture adapted to the local topography and has been recognized as a state heritage site since 1979.
Paróquia Nossa Senhora da Conceição (Nossa Senhora da Conceição Parish)	The main church of Areia, it was listed by the IPHAN (National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage) in 2002. Located in the city center, it presents architectural features typical of eighteenth-century colonial chapels and Baroque style, with records indicating that construction began around 1721.
Igreja Nossa Senhora do Rosário (Nossa Senhora do Rosário Church)	One of the most well-known churches in the Brejo Paraibano region, Nossa Senhora do Rosário church began construction in the late nineteenth century, with historical records dating to around 1865. The church was listed by the Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage of the State of Paraíba in 1979 and holds significant cultural and historical value for residents and visitors.

Table 4: Tourist attractions in Bananeiras, PB

Tourist attractions	Description
Engenho Goiamanduba	Located 7.5 km from the city center, this is one of the oldest sugar mills in the state of Paraíba, built in 1852. In 1854, it began producing its aguardente, *Rainha* (a beverage similar to cachaça but with a higher alcohol content). The site offers guided tours with tastings and information about the history of the site and the Bezerra Cavalcanti family.
Igreja Matriz Nossa Senhora do Livramento (Nossa Senhora do Livramento Parish Church)	Located in the city center, this church has been a regional landmark since the beginning of its construction in the nineteenth century and was completed in 1861. Situated at the highest point in the city, it offers a privileged view of the surrounding area. The site is also notable for its well-preserved architecture and for the festivities held in the courtyard in front of the parish.
Túnel Serra da Viração (Serra da Viração Tunnel)	Built between 1921 and 1923 by English engineers and inaugurated in 1925, the tunnel is located 1.5 km from the city center and measures approximately 120–200 meters in length. It remained in operation until 1966 and currently functions as a tourist attraction.
Carmelo Sagrado Coração de Jesus e Madre Tereza	Located 3.3 km from the city center, this monastery was inaugurated in 2010. The site is an important place of religious significance and offers religious handicrafts, as well as a distinctive architectural structure that attracts numerous visitors.

These are the 11 attractions in the city that were selected for evaluation during the application of the checklist. Although Bananeiras is larger than Areia, a large portion of its attractions are located far from the city center. As a result, several of them did not meet the criteria established for selecting the attractions to be evaluated during the field visits. Therefore, the following locations were selected:

After completing the site visits and applying the checklist, a systematic table will be prepared for each location, presenting its accessibility conditions according to each of the selected criteria. This table will aim to clearly indicate the strengths of each site as well as the main changes required for it to be considered suitable for all types of visitors accessing the analyzed spaces. In addition to the table summarizing the situation of each evaluated location based on the checklist, photographs will be taken to highlight the measures necessary to make each site accessible and to identify locations that are already adapted to accommodate a wide range of visitors.

CONCLUSION

Accessibility has become a central topic in contemporary discussions, particularly in light of increased life expectancy resulting from technological advances, especially in the health sector. In this context, incorporating accessibility into the field of tourism is essential for the sustainable development of this activity. Since tourism aims to provide satisfying experiences, quality of life, and moments of leisure, ensuring accessible conditions is fundamental to guaranteeing that all people can fully participate in tourism activities, regardless of physical, sensory, or cognitive limitations.

This study, currently under development as part of the Institutional Scientific Initiation Scholarship Program at the Federal University of Paraíba, aims to identify the main accessibility-related challenges in tourist attractions, bars, and restaurants and to propose alternatives to overcome the obstacles identified. Given the growth of tourism in the Brejo Paraibano region, producing research that highlights these challenges and presents proposals aimed at promoting inclusive tourism in the state of Paraíba is particularly relevant, with special attention to the municipalities of Areia and Bananeiras. Accessibility in these destinations is an essential condition for ensuring that their cultural, historical, architectural, natural, and gastronomic heritage can be enjoyed by the entire population, without restrictions or barriers to access.

The right to freedom of movement is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil, specifically in Article 5, item XV, which establishes that individuals are free to move within the national territory during times of peace. The effective exercise of this right requires adequate accessibility conditions and the elimination of physical, architectural, and attitudinal barriers that may hinder individuals' full participation in social activities, including tourism.

In this context, further research on accessibility in tourism contributes to expanding the academic and social debate on inclusion, encouraging critical analyses and the development of strategies that ensure safe and dignified access to the attractions of the Brejo Paraibano. By promoting accessible tourism, it is possible not only to ensure the fulfillment of a constitutional right but also to enhance the value of regional resources while providing experiences that promote knowledge, leisure, well-being, and quality of life for all.

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TOURISM AND OLDER ADULTS: ACCESSIBILITY IN ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES IN AREIA AND BANANEIRAS, PARAÍBA (BRAZIL)

Maria Luiza Batista Henrique da Silva[1], Adriana Brambilla[2], Elídio Vanzella[3]

ABSTRACT: *In Brazil, the significant growth of the population aged 60 and over highlights the need for policies and practices that ensure inclusion, autonomy, and quality of life for this segment of society. In this context, tourism emerges as an important instrument for promoting the physical, mental, and social well-being of older adults by encouraging social interaction, leisure, and new experiences. However, for this participation to occur fully, tourism destinations must provide adequate accessibility conditions, as recommended by NBR 9050 and other current regulations. Given this context, this study analyzes accessibility conditions in accommodation facilities, food and beverage establishments, and tourist attractions in the municipalities of Areia and Bananeiras, which are part of the Caminhos do Frio Cultural Route, in the state of Paraíba, Brazil. The research is exploratory and descriptive in nature and adopts both quantitative and qualitative approaches, using a checklist based on technical accessibility criteria. The results are expected to contribute to the planning and management of more inclusive tourism by supporting structural improvements and strengthening the participation of older adults in the destinations analyzed.*

KEYWORDS: *accommodation, accessibility, older adults, Areia, Bananeiras.*

INTRODUCTION

Population aging has become one of the main demographic, social, and urban challenges of the 21st century, requiring the formulation of public policies and the restructuring of urban spaces and services to ensure the full participation of older adults in community life (Maciel; Ferreira, 2018). This demographic process directly affects social, economic, and institutional dynamics, demanding strategies that promote autonomy, dignity, and quality of life. The growth of the older adult population in Brazil further reinforces this need. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics indicate a significant increase in the number of people aged 65 and over in recent decades, highlighting the consolidation of a new demographic configuration in the country (IBGE, 2023). This scenario presents structural challenges related to mobility, access to services, and social inclusion.

Diniz et al. (2021) emphasize that accessibility is an indispensable condition for the autonomy of older adults, especially in urban environments where infrastructure often fails to meet the specific needs of this population group. Physical barriers such as uneven sidewalks, the absence of ramps, and inadequate signage limit mobility, restricting access to goods, services, and opportunities for community interaction. This understanding extends beyond architectural adaptations to encompass the social and symbolic dimensions of urban mobility, including the recognition of older adults' specific needs in the design of integrated public policies.

The promotion of accessibility in Brazil is regulated, among other instruments, by Law No. 10,048/2000 and Law No. 10,098/2000, which establish general standards and basic criteria for the inclusion of people with disabilities or reduced mobility. In addition, the Brazilian

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Association of Technical Standards, through NBR 9050, defines technical parameters for the adaptation of buildings, furniture, and urban spaces in order to ensure safety, autonomy, and comfort (ABNT, 2020). Compliance with these guidelines is essential in the tourism and hospitality sector, particularly in historic regions, where architectural characteristics may constitute barriers to mobility.

In the field of hospitality, Castelli (2016) emphasizes that contemporary hotel management must incorporate inclusive practices that recognize the diversity of its clientele. Walker (2002) further notes that hospitality involves not only a symbolic welcome but also adequate structural conditions to ensure guests' well-being. Thus, accessibility in accommodation facilities should be understood not merely as a legal requirement but also as a strategic element for improving service quality and fostering customer loyalty.

Nogueira et al. (2018) understand accessibility in tourism as a fundamental principle for promoting social inclusion in the hospitality sector. The authors argue that accessibility should not be limited to the elimination of physical barriers; rather, it should be understood in a broader sense, encompassing communication, information, and attitudinal aspects that ensure autonomy and dignity for users of tourism services. In this context, they emphasize that contemporary hospitality requires businesses to adopt both ethical and structural approaches aimed at addressing human diversity, particularly in view of the growing number of older adults and people with reduced mobility.

International studies reinforce this perspective by demonstrating that older adults have specific motivations for tourism, valuing safety, comfort, accessibility, and personalized service (Nicolau et al., 2020; Wijaya et al., 2018). Cockburn-Wootten and McIntosh (2020) argue that the tourism industry must adopt inclusive approaches to respond to the demands of an aging market, thereby expanding opportunities for participation and reducing structural and attitudinal barriers.

Brejo Paraibano is one of the most significant tourist regions in the state of Paraíba, notable for its distinctive climate, mountainous terrain, and preservation of its historical and cultural heritage. Municipalities such as Areia and Bananeiras are recognized for their historic mansions, traditional sugar mills, and the development of cultural and tourism-related activities that strengthen the local economy (PMA, 2019). These characteristics make the region an attractive destination for experiential, historical, and rural tourism, segments often associated with older adult travelers.

Given this context, the general objective of this study is to analyze the accessibility conditions in accommodation facilities located in the municipalities of Areia and Bananeiras, Paraíba, in order to determine whether they meet the needs of older adults.

Regarding quality of life for older adults, Vanzella (2016) argues that aging is a natural phenomenon inherent to the human condition and should not be interpreted from a negative perspective. As the author states, "aging should not be interpreted as something negative or derogatory, because aging is natural; it represents the victory of life, health, and care. Aging is the certainty of having lived" (Vanzella, 2016, p. 1). The author also emphasizes that aging is a differential process, as individuals experience it in unique ways, influenced by biological, social, and cultural factors. In addition, Diniz et al. (2021) emphasize that mobility and access to urban spaces are determining factors for the autonomy and social integration of older adults, significantly affecting their quality of life.

However, cities with historic layouts, such as Areia and Bananeiras, often face challenges related to adapting older buildings to contemporary accessibility standards. Duarte and Cohen (2015) argue that inclusive urban planning should consider the physical diversity of the population from the project design stage, thereby avoiding later interventions that increase

costs and compromise the functionality of spaces. This reflection applies directly to accommodation facilities located in historic areas, where heritage preservation must be reconciled with the promotion of accessibility and inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

This study is exploratory and descriptive in nature and adopts both quantitative and qualitative approaches. It focuses on analyzing accessibility conditions for older adults in accommodation facilities located in the municipalities of Areia and Bananeiras, in the Brejo Paraibano region of the state of Paraíba, Brazil. These locations were selected due to the growing tourism demand driven by both their natural characteristics and their cultural heritage, which includes historic churches, traditional sugar mills, local cuisine, cultural festivals, and handicraft production.

The study is part of a PIBIC (Institutional Program for Scientific Initiation Scholarships) project at the Federal University of Paraíba and is currently in progress. To date, a systematic literature review has been conducted, covering scientific publications, technical documents, and applied studies related to accessibility, quality of life in older age, urban mobility, and inclusive hospitality. In the second stage, a checklist was developed based on the standards established by NBR 9050 (2020), the Statute of the Elderly (Law No. 10,741/2003) (Brazil, 2003), legislation on priority assistance for older adults (Law No. 10,048/2000) (Brazil, 2000), legislation promoting accessibility for people with disabilities or reduced mobility (Law No. 10,098/2000) (Brazil, 2000), and the National Policy for the Elderly (Law No. 8,842/1994) (Brazil, 1994). Following these steps, a survey of accommodation facilities was conducted using the Cadastur registry (Register of Tourism Service Providers) and the Booking.com platform. The selection included hotels, farm hotels, chalets, and inns.

RESULTS

The results of this study will be presented after the completion of the fieldwork stage, based on the application of an accessibility checklist in accommodation facilities located in the municipalities of Areia and Bananeiras, in the Brejo Paraibano region. The establishments selected for analysis are those registered in Cadastur, the official system of the Brazilian Ministry of Tourism that registers and certifies individuals and legal entities operating in the national tourism sector, as well as establishments listed on Booking.com, one of the largest online travel agencies worldwide, This platform provides standardized information on types of accommodation, available infrastructure, services offered, and, in some cases, data related to accessibility. Following this stage, a total of 19 accommodation facilities were identified in Areia and 16 in Bananeiras. These establishments will constitute the sample to be analyzed through the application of the checklist and photographic records, as presented in the table below:

Table 1: Accommodation facilities in Areia, PB.

Accommodation facilities	Location	Primary clientele
Aconcheg'Art	Areia-PB	Couples, cultural tourists, and travelers seeking intimate accommodations
Agro Villa	Areia-PB	Families and couples seeking contact with nature
Apart Hotel Vaca Brava	Areia-PB	Families, couples, and tourists on extended stays
Hotel Escola SESC SENAC Bruxaxa	Areia-PB	General tourists, academic groups, and older adults
Hotel Fazenda Triunfo	Areia-PB	Families, leisure groups, and rural tourism visitors
PB Turismo e Hotelaria	Areia-PB	Business travelers and short-stay visitors
Poesia da Serra	Areia-PB	Couples and tourists seeking tranquility
Pousada Casa do Lago	Areia-PB	Couples and small families
Pousada Coração da Serra	Areia-PB	Couples and leisure tourists
Pousada Diamante da Serra	Areia-PB	Couples and rural tourism visitors
Pousada Villa Real	Areia-PB	Families and couples
Sítio Casa de Vó	Areia-PB	Families and groups seeking rural tourism experiences
Pousada Sierra	Areia-PB	Couples and leisure tourists
Chalés de Areia	Areia-PB	Couples and families seeking privacy
Casarão 47	Areia-PB	Couples and cultural tourists
Chalés da Gameleira	Areia-PB	Families and couples
Balneário Rio Água Viva – Chalé Família	Areia-PB	Families and leisure groups
Casa Naza	Areia-PB	Families and small groups
Casa Pátio	Areia-PB	Tourists interested in rural and cultural tourism

Table 2: Accommodation facilities in Bananeiras, PB.

Accommodation facilities	Location	Primary clientele
Cenário Hostel	Bananeiras-PB	Young travelers, backpackers, and budget tourists
Domo Bananeiras	Bananeiras-PB	Couples and tourists seeking a differentiated experience (glamping)
Eco Spazzio Tropical	Bananeiras-PB	Couples and families engaged in nature tourism
Ecocamping Dona Toinha	Bananeiras-PB	Campers, adventure travelers, and youth groups
Estação Bananeiras Pousada	Bananeiras-PB	Couples and families
Lira Conveniência	Bananeiras-PB	Transit tourists and short-stay travelers
Ninho Peregrino	Bananeiras-PB	Couples and tourists seeking tranquility
Pousada Caminho do Frio	Bananeiras-PB	Tourists attending the *Caminhos do Frio* event, couples, and families
RS5 Hotel e Locação de Veículos Ltda	Bananeiras-PB	Business and leisure tourists
Serra Golfe Apart Hotel	Bananeiras-PB	Families, couples, and upper-middle-income tourists
Serra Verde Empreendimentos Turísticos	Bananeiras-PB	Families and leisure tourists
Villas Cocos Chalés	Bananeiras-PB	Couples and families seeking privacy
Pousada Estação Bananeiras	Bananeiras-PB	Couples and families
Chalés Alta Vista	Bananeiras-PB	Couples and romantic tourism
Lar das Cerejeiras	Bananeiras-PB	Families and small groups
Zuppolini Garden Hotel	Bananeiras-PB	Couples, families, and social events
Aconchegante Stúdio com Varanda	Bananeiras-PB	Couples and individual tourists

The organization of the results will follow a systematic structure aimed at ensuring clarity, objectivity, and consistency with the objectives proposed in the study. Initially, a general characterization of the accommodation facilities analyzed will be presented, including type (hotel, inn, farm hotel, or chalet), location, and the profile of the clientele served. This stage will help contextualize the setting investigated and allow for a better understanding of the structural and functional specificities of the establishments evaluated. The results will be presented through comparative and descriptive tables, showing the percentage of compliance

of the establishments with the accessibility criteria assessed. When appropriate, graphical representations will also be used to facilitate the visualization of the conformities and nonconformities identified. In addition to the descriptive quantitative analysis of the checklist items, an interpretive qualitative analysis will be conducted based on photographic records and partial reports prepared after each technical visit. These records will enable the identification of recurring challenges, good practices, structural limitations, and potential gaps in compliance with established accessibility standards.

CONCLUSION

By focusing the investigation on accommodation facilities located in the municipalities of Areia and Bananeiras, in the Brejo Paraibano region, this study highlights the importance of addressing accessibility in historic tourism contexts, where heritage preservation often coexists with structural limitations. Adaptating these buildings represents a technical challenge; however, it is a necessary step for regional tourism to consolidate itself in an inclusive and socially responsible manner.

The methodology adopted, which includes a literature review, document analysis, and the application of a checklist based on official regulations, will allow the identification of levels of compliance, structural gaps, and potential good practices among the establishments evaluated. The results are expected to contribute to supporting public and private managers in the development of strategies aimed at improving accessibility conditions, thereby strengthening the positioning of the Brejo Paraibano region as a welcoming destination for older adults.

Finally, it should be emphasized that promoting accessibility in accommodation facilities is not only a legal requirement but also an ethical and strategic commitment within contemporary hospitality. By recognizing the functional diversity of visitors and incorporating inclusive practices, the tourism sector can enhance its competitiveness, foster customer loyalty, and contribute to more equitable and sustainable development.

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MANAGING ACCESSIBILITY IN URBAN DESTINATIONS: POLICY FRAMEWORK AND INSIGHTS FROM SOFIA

Stelena Angelova[1]

ABSTRACT: *Accessible tourism has emerged as both a human rights imperative and a strategic factor for competitive destinations. This paper examines how accessibility is integrated into destination management policies at European, national, and local levels, with a focus on Sofia as an urban tourism destination. Through analysis of strategic and normative documents, the study reveals that while the European Union has developed a comprehensive framework for accessible tourism—including the EU Disability Strategy 2021–2030, and the European Accessibility Act—implementation at national and local levels remains fragmented. In Bulgaria, accessibility policies exist primarily within disability and social inclusion frameworks, but accessible tourism is not explicitly prioritized in national tourism strategies. Sofia demonstrates partial integration through measures targeting senior tourists and participation in European networks like CityDNA, yet accessibility scores low in visitor evaluations and lacks systematic embedding in destination management practices. The findings highlight the need for urban destinations to adopt a value chain approach that ensures accessibility across all touchpoints of the tourist experience, transforming accessibility from an isolated initiative into a core element of destination competitiveness and social sustainability.*

KEYWORDS: *accessible tourism, destination management, urban tourism, tourism policy*

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines destination management through the lens of accessible tourism at European, national, and local levels, with special focus on Sofia as an urban tourism destination. The object of study comprises the policies, institutions, and management approaches that shape the development of tourist destinations in the context of accessible tourism. The subject of the study includes European strategic and normative frameworks, national and local policies for promoting accessible tourism, as well as specific initiatives by the local authorities for integrating accessibility into the management of Sofia as a destination.

Accessible tourism, often defined as "tourism for all," is based on the principles of universal design and aims to guarantee equal access to tourism resources, services, and experiences for all people, regardless of their physical, visual, auditory, or cognitive limitations (Simon, Darcy & Dickson, 2009). The World Tourism Organization (2013) defines accessible tourism as "a form of tourism that involves processes for creating environments, products and services accessible to all people, so they can participate in tourism independently, under equal conditions and with dignity". Such a position is also expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which recognizes the right to participate in tourism as an inalienable human right.

The significance of accessible tourism far exceeds issues of social inclusion - it is establishing itself as an economic resource and driver for the development of competitive and sustainable tourist destinations. According to the World Health Organization (2022), approximately 16% of the world's population or around 1.3 billion people lives with some form of disability. In addition, the population of advanced age is continuously increasing: according to European Commission projections (2023), by 2050 people over 65 years are expected to constitute over one-third of European Union residents. These trends shape a significant and growing segment of travelers with specific requirements for tourism services, infrastructure, and accessibility. At the same time, the group of consumers in advanced age travels with the

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same or higher frequency compared to the rest of the population, often spending more time in the destination and generating higher expenditures, contributing to economic growth, extending the tourism season, and stimulating employment (Fundación ONCE, 2017).

At the European level, accessible tourism fits into broader strategic frameworks for the rights of persons with disabilities and for sustainable and inclusive development. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the European Disability Strategy 2021–2030, the European Accessibility Act, as well as the Transition Pathway for Tourism place strong emphasis on the need for destinations to ensure an accessible environment, transport, information, and services for both local residents and visitors. In this context, accessible tourism is establishing itself as an integral part of tourism destination management policies and is not viewed only as a limited initiative by individual actors.

In an urban environment, accessible tourism acquires particular importance. Cities are major tourism destinations and cultural centers that attract a large portion of tourist flows. The relevance of the topic is reinforced by the aforementioned trend of population ageing, which leads to increasing demand for accessible urban spaces and services, while European policies for sustainable development and social inclusion increasingly position "tourism for all" as a strategic priority. Sofia, as the capital and main entry point for international tourists to Bulgaria, is not exempt from these trends and faces the need to adapt its policies and management approaches to European standards and good practices.

The main objective of this paper is to analyze the place of accessible tourism in the management of tourist destinations and to assess Sofia's position in the context of European policies and practices for "tourism for all." In accordance with this objective, the following main tasks are formulated: to examine the concept of "accessible tourism" and its links with the principles of universal design, the value chain of accessible tourism, and destination management; to analyze the main European strategic and normative documents that define the framework for the development of accessible tourism; to review European-level initiatives for promoting improvement of accessibility levels in urban destinations; and to assess to what extent and in what way Sofia integrates accessible tourism into its strategic and operational documents and initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, document-based research approach to examine how accessible tourism is integrated into destination management policies across multiple governance levels.

To achieve the stated objective and tasks, the research is based primarily on secondary sources: strategic and normative documents at the international and European level, national and municipal strategic documents in the field of tourism and urban development, as well as academic literature devoted to tourism destination management and accessible tourism. Emphasis is placed on documents from the United Nations through its specialized World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism), the European Commission, as well as on studies and reports from specialized organizations and networks working in the field of accessible tourism. The analytical approach identifies gaps and consistencies between policy levels, examining whether accessibility principles embedded in higher-level frameworks (EU, international) are systematically translated into operational tourism strategies and destination management practices. The study applies concepts from destination management literature: particularly the tourism value chain framework and universal design principles, to interpret how accessibility is (or is not) integrated across the different touchpoints of the urban tourism experience.

The limitations of the study stem from the focus on selected strategic documents and

the lack of primary data, so the conclusions made have primarily a conceptual and analytical character.

RESULTS

European framework for accessible tourism

The European Union has developed a comprehensive normative and strategic framework for the rights of persons with disabilities, in which accessibility is viewed as a key condition for equal participation in public life, including tourism, culture, and urban activities. This framework builds upon the obligations of the EU and member states that have adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and transforms them into concrete strategies, directives, and initiatives that have direct impact on tourism destination management.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the European Union and member states, defines the framework within which national and European accessibility policies must develop. Article 9 "Accessibility" introduces the obligation for states to ensure access to the physical environment, transport, information and communications, as well as to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, including tourism and cultural sites. Article 30, devoted to participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure, and sport, emphasizes the right of persons with disabilities to equal access to cultural events, sports facilities, tourism sites, and more. The EU and member states integrate accessibility requirements into their policies and legislation in areas such as transport, digital services, regional development, and tourism.

A core EU document is the "Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030," which aims to improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities by guaranteeing their rights, equal opportunities, free movement, and full participation in society (European Commission, 2021). The strategy builds upon the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and continues the previous European Disability Strategy 2010–2020, but expands the focus on accessibility and participation in all spheres of life, including culture, sport, and tourism.

One of the key pillars of the strategy is "Accessibility - a condition for equal rights, autonomy and equality," which recognizes accessibility as a prerequisite for exercising all other rights. In this context, the goal is set to improve accessibility of the physical and digital environment, transport, information, and communications throughout the EU, with special emphasis on the role of cities and regions in implementing measures. The document underscores that persons with disabilities must have equal access to cultural activities, sport and tourism, as well as to travel and mobility, which directs attention toward the development of accessible tourist destinations.

The strategy also provides for specific initiatives related to mobility and tourism, including the introduction of a European Disability Card and European Parking Card, which will facilitate recognition of the status of persons with disabilities in different member states and improve access to services during travel. In this way, the EU's strategic framework links accessibility with real mechanisms for free movement and participation in social life.

Another important legislative instrument is the European Accessibility Act (2019), which introduces common minimum accessibility requirements for certain products and services on the EU internal market. The Act covers a range of services and products that are relevant to tourism and urban destinations, including: computer and operating systems, self-service terminals (ATMs, ticketing machines and check-in terminals), e-commerce services, communication services and related consumer interfaces.

From a tourism perspective, the requirements for accessibility of websites and mobile applications, online booking and ticketing platforms, as well as automated customer service systems are particularly important, as these are primary contact points between tourists and the destination, and between tourists and service providers. The tourism industry relies significantly on the internet for searching and purchasing services related to individual or group travel, which makes digital accessibility a key condition for real participation of persons with disabilities in tourism (Fernández-Díaz et al., 2025). For urban destinations, this means that not only the physical environment but also digital communication and services must be designed in a way that allows use by people who need alternative information formats, in accordance with the European Accessibility Act and following the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 3.0).

Implementation of the European Accessibility Act requires member states to adapt their national legislation and introduce supervision and control mechanisms, which has a direct impact on the activity of tourism operators, transport companies, and destination management organizations. From a destination management perspective, the Act creates a regulatory framework that stimulates the integration of accessibility as a standard characteristic of products and services, rather than as a voluntary good practice.

Alongside general accessibility measures, the EU develops sectoral policies and regulations that are relevant to accessible tourism, especially in an urban context. Regulations on the rights of passengers with disabilities or reduced mobility in air, rail, water, and bus transport guarantee the right to free assistance at key points (airports, stations, ports), prohibit discrimination in reservations and boarding, and require provision of information in accessible format.

The European Commission has also developed the strategic document "Transition Pathway for Tourism" (2022) as part of the broader vision for green and digital transformation of the tourism system, in which accessibility and inclusion are identified as key parameters for sustainability and competitiveness. The document insists on actions to improve destination accessibility, integrate accessibility criteria into project financing and public procurement, as well as to promote training and capacity building of tourism stakeholders.

In addition, the European Commission develops initiatives such as the European Capital of Smart Tourism and Access City Award, which complement the strategic and legislative framework by turning accessibility into a concrete and measurable criterion for the quality of urban destinations and tourism services. The European Capital of Smart Tourism distinguishes cities that apply innovative solutions in four main categories - accessibility, sustainability, digitalization, and cultural heritage and creativity, with accessibility viewed as a structural pillar rather than a secondary aspect (European Commission, 2025). Guidelines for applicants emphasize that cities must demonstrate a systematic approach to accessibility of tourism infrastructure, attractions and services, information and digital services, multilingual and accessible websites and online booking platforms. Application forms require concrete evidence of good practices showing how destinations ensure equal access and opportunity for participation for all visitors - persons with disabilities, elderly people, families with children, and other groups with different needs - through integrated solutions for accessible mobility, city navigation, cultural events, and tourism products. This positions accessibility as a key component of "smart" tourism, in sync with the European Accessibility Act and the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030.

Access City Award, in turn, distinguishes European cities that successfully develop accessibility policies in the urban environment, including aspects directly related to tourism and urban lifestyle. The award criteria cover accessibility of the urban environment and public

spaces, transport and related infrastructure, information and communication, as well as accessibility of public services. Distinguished cities demonstrate how accessibility measures - from fully accessible public transport systems and adapted pedestrian routes to cultural events with alternative information formats - enhance the quality of life for the local population and improve the tourism experience for persons with disabilities. The good practices database associated with the award shows how cities integrate accessibility into their long-term strategies for urban development, tourism, and culture, rather than treating it as a single, isolated initiative.

Through these initiatives, the EU materializes the strategic vision for accessibility laid out in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, the Transition Pathway for Tourism, and the European Accessibility Act, by creating incentives and recognition mechanisms for cities that systematically integrate accessibility into destination management. Thus, the European framework for accessibility manifests both in the form of legally binding regulations and through awards, competitions, and exchange of good practices that encourage cities to turn accessibility into a standard characteristic rather than a voluntary initiative or niche policy.

Accessible tourism in Bulgaria

The development of accessible tourism in Bulgaria takes place in the context of the European strategic and normative framework, but has its specific dynamics conditioned by local institutions and their mechanisms. The topic of accessibility is gradually beginning to be recognized as an element of sustainable development and destination competitiveness, but is still rarely considered as an independent strategic direction.

The national framework for persons with disabilities and accessibility in Bulgaria is shaped in sync with the country's commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and with European strategic documents such as the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030. The main document in this direction is the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, which aims to ensure social inclusion, better access to services, education, employment, and independent living for persons with disabilities. The strategy emphasizes the need to transition from a medical to a social model of disability and positions accessibility of the environment, transport, information, and services as a factor without which real participation and equal opportunities cannot be achieved. Although tourism is not highlighted as a separate thematic axis, measures for improving physical and digital accessibility, for removing barriers in urban infrastructure, and for developing accessible services create a framework in which the development of accessible tourism is possible - provided that coordination is achieved between social, transport, urban planning, and tourism policy. In this way, policies for persons with disabilities set the general requirement for an accessible environment and services, but leave open the question of to what extent the tourism sector will take advantage of this framework to develop specific products, routes, and destinations oriented toward the principles of "tourism for all."

A substantial element of the national accessibility framework is the implementation of the European Accessibility Act in Bulgarian legislation. This is realized through the Law on Accessibility Requirements for Products and Services, which enters into force on June 28, 2025, and introduces common minimum accessibility requirements for certain products and services placed on the European Union market. The law covers a range of products and services that have direct relevance to tourism and urban destinations - from self-service terminals to electronic communication services, e-commerce platforms, websites and mobile applications through which tourism services can be offered and booked. Implementation of the law means that tourism operators, transport companies, as well as public bodies responsible for tourism

information - including national and municipal portals, online booking systems and ticket sales - must ensure compliance with accessibility requirements for interfaces, content, and functionalities of their services. This creates a normative precondition for accessibility to become a minimum standard that must be met if a given service is to be offered on the market. However, the real effect on tourism destination management will depend on the extent to which enforcement of the law is consistent, as well as on the capacity of institutions and businesses to adapt digital infrastructure, information systems, and service delivery to the needs of persons with disabilities. In this sense, the Law on Accessibility Requirements for Products and Services provides an important link between the European normative framework and concrete practices at national and local levels, but does not in itself guarantee systematic development of accessible tourism if not supported by targeted tourism policies.

National tourism policy in Bulgaria develops mainly through the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism 2014–2030, which lays the foundations for long-term sector development in accordance with principles of sustainability, competitiveness, and regional balance. The strategy formulates several main objectives, including creating a favorable environmental and business climate for sustainable tourism development, developing a competitive tourism sector, successful positioning of Bulgaria on the world tourism market, and balanced development of tourism regions. Within these objectives, measures are envisaged for improving the normative framework, enhancing interaction between institutions, promoting cooperation between enterprises, providing information support for businesses, implementing quality management systems, developing tourism products, and raising the quality of the tourism experience.

Of particular significance for the territorial dimension of tourism is the Concept for Tourism Regionalization of Bulgaria adopted in 2015, which is aligned with the requirements of the Law of Tourism of 2013. This Law regulates for the first time the creation of tourism regions for the purposes of regional marketing and tourism management at the regional level, and the concept defines nine tourism regions that were gradually established and registered in the period up to 2019. This regionalization aims to create better conditions for coordination between local authorities, businesses, and other stakeholders, as well as for developing integrated regional products and more effective destination marketing.

Despite the fact that the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism and related documents clearly emphasize the need for sustainable and balanced development as well as improving the quality of tourism services, the topic of accessible tourism is not highlighted as a priority. Accessibility appears more indirectly - through measures for improving infrastructure and service quality - but there is no systematic consideration of the needs of persons with disabilities and elderly tourists, or of the potential of accessible tourism as a market segment and instrument for social inclusion. This places Bulgaria in a position where there is an existing framework for sustainable development and regional tourism management, but without a clearly formulated strategic response to European requirements and trends in the field of "tourism for all."

Tourism management in this context can be defined as a system of processes requiring coordinated efforts and a strategic approach in which the participation of public authorities - both at national and local levels - is inevitable and critical. For accessible tourism to be integrated into this system, it is necessary to create a clearer link between policies for persons with disabilities, the normative framework for accessibility, and strategic documents for tourism development, as well as to ensure concrete mechanisms for applying accessibility principles in destination management.

The positioning of accessible tourism in Bulgaria's national context remains more

indirect and fragmented. Policies for persons with disabilities and accessibility legislation create important preconditions for developing accessible services, environment, and communication that can be used in the tourism sector as well, but the national tourism strategy does not identify accessible tourism as a strategic priority. The absence of Bulgarian cities among recipients of European distinctions such as European Capital of Smart Tourism or Access City Award further suggests that the integration of accessibility and smart destination management has not yet reached a level that receives European recognition, unlike numerous other European cities. Against this background, accessible tourism in Bulgaria can be defined as an area with available normative and strategic potential but with limited degree of real integration into national tourism policy, which opens a field for developing more targeted measures, especially at the level of urban destinations such as Sofia.

Accessible tourism in Sofia

Accessible tourism in Sofia develops within the framework of the general model of tourism management in the capital, in which a key role is played by Sofia Municipality through the specialized Tourism Municipal Enterprise and associated tourist information centers. Sofia's tourism administration performs municipal activities regulated in the Law of Tourism related to registration, categorization, and control of tourism facilities on the municipality's territory, as well as presenting Sofia as a tourism destination in the country and abroad. Part of its functions include organizing and conducting advertising campaigns, participating in tourism exhibitions, developing and distributing promotional and informational materials, as well as maintaining the city's official tourism portal VisitSofia, which provides information about attractions, events, accommodation, transport, and other services.

Tourist information centers in Sofia complement this structure by providing free information and promotional materials about the city, assisting guests with orientation and choosing places to visit, maintaining and updating available information, and distributing tourism maps and brochures. Although these activities are not explicitly designated as "accessible tourism," they have potential to contribute to accessibility if information and materials are offered in various formats and channels adapted to the needs of persons with disabilities (e.g., easy-to-read materials, multilingual content, digital resources compatible with screen readers, information in sign language). At this stage, however, accessibility is mentioned more as part of the general function of "facilitating orientation" and "providing information" rather than as an independent strategic priority within the destination management organization.

The strategic framework for tourism development in Sofia is shaped by several key documents. The Strategy for Development of Sofia as a Tourism Destination 2017–2030 formulates the long-term vision for the capital as a recognizable, competitive, and year-round urban destination, with emphasis on cultural, event, and business tourism, diversification of tourism products, infrastructure improvement, and raising the quality of the tourism experience. Within this vision, objectives are set related to modernizing the urban environment, developing new routes, better transport connectivity, and strengthening Sofia's tourism brand, which creates a potential framework for including accessibility as an element of destination quality and sustainability. However, the strategic document lacks clearly formulated objectives or priority directions devoted specifically to accessible tourism, as well as indicators to track progress specifically regarding accessibility of the urban environment and services. The Action Plan to the Strategy transforms long-term objectives into concrete annual measures - participation in exhibitions, organizing events, developing tourism infrastructure, and supporting information activities - and includes elements that are indirectly related to accessible tourism. Within Specific Objective 1, aimed at creating year-round integrated/comprehensive

tourism products for priority market segments, one measure provides for offering combined programs for extended stays by elderly tourists (55+), which builds on European trends for developing tourism for the senior population and more even year-round destination loading. However, beyond this indirect emphasis on "senior" tourists, the action plan does not explicitly formulate measures aimed at improving accessibility for persons with disabilities across the entire tourism experience chain, but rather views improvements as part of general modernization and diversification of tourism infrastructure and services.

The Communication Strategy of Sofia as a Tourism Destination 2023–2027 complements this framework by defining target markets, key messages, and channels for promoting the city, with focus on Sofia's image as a modern European city with rich cultural-historical heritage, dynamic urban life, and proximity to nature, and provides for intensive use of VisitSofia, social networks, and partnership campaigns. The document presents results from a survey of foreign tourists evaluating Sofia's tourism resources, and notably "conditions for persons with disabilities" receive the lowest average score among all studied parameters - 3.48 on a five-point scale - which clearly signals that accessibility is perceived as a relatively weak element of the city's tourism environment. Despite this finding, the strategy does not develop a separate communication line aimed at persons with disabilities, nor does it systematically use the idea of "tourism for all" as part of Sofia's brand, and the issue of content and channel accessibility remains more within the framework of general requirements for modern and effective digital communication rather than as a clearly formulated priority.

A substantive view of Sofia's position as a destination is also provided by literature on tourism development in the city. In the analysis of Sofia's tourism products, Marinov et al. (2015) emphasize that the capital has significant potential for developing urban and extra-urban forms of tourism, but this potential remains largely unrealized, and Sofia is still not perceived as a highly attractive tourism destination. Other studies of Sofia's tourism product show that the city possesses a diversity of resources and products - urban and extra-urban, mass and specialized, based on natural and anthropogenic, tangible and intangible resources - which creates preconditions for a diversified product. Based on representative data from the accommodation sector (Petkova & Marinov, 2014) it has been established that event, cultural, and business tourism are perceived as products with high potential, while the current state of all types of tourism is rated lower than potential. The municipality needs to conduct targeted policy for diversifying the tourism product, developing and promoting both urban and extra-urban forms of tourism to achieve sustainable use of resources and full satisfaction of different market segments.

Placing these results in the context of accessible tourism suggests an important management conclusion: if Sofia follows a strategy for diversified products, accessibility must develop in parallel across all types of tourism - cultural, event, business, nature, spa, pilgrimage - and not only as a characteristic of separate objects or segments. This is consistent with the concept of the tourism value chain, according to which the tourism experience results from interconnected stages: information and planning, transport, accommodation, access to attractions, additional services, and any gap in this chain can make the destination practically inaccessible for persons with disabilities. For Sofia, this means that efforts to diversify the tourism product should be accompanied by a systematic approach to accessibility across the entire chain.

An additional dimension of Sofia's positioning as a tourism destination is its membership in City Destinations Alliance (CityDNA) - the European alliance of tourism boards, convention bureaus, and destination management organizations, in which Sofia has participated since September 2021. CityDNA defines itself as "a knowledge-sharing alliance

among cities and city regions" committed to developing sustainable, inclusive, and responsible tourism, which includes strong focus on topics such as accessibility. In 2024, City Destinations Alliance and Destinations International published the Global Accessibility Report, which emphasizes that "investments in accessibility are not only a moral commitment but also a strategic necessity for destinations and a source of economic benefits". Sofia's membership in CityDNA and hosting of the organization's international conference in 2023 create additional opportunities for the city to leverage knowledge, tools, and good practices in the field of accessible tourism, but the real extent to which these resources are integrated into local tourism policy and practices still requires further development and systematic implementation.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of European, national, and local policy frameworks reveals a fundamental disconnect between the comprehensive accessibility vision articulated at EU level and its operationalization in destination management practice. This gap illustrates a broader challenge facing urban destinations: translating normative commitments into systematic, value-chain-integrated approaches to accessible tourism.

At the European level, accessibility has evolved from a human rights principle into a multidimensional policy framework that encompasses legal obligations (European Accessibility Act), strategic priorities (EU Disability Strategy 2021–2030), sectoral regulations (passenger rights), and recognition mechanisms (Access City Award, European Capital of Smart Tourism). This framework explicitly positions accessibility not as a niche concern but as a core dimension of destination competitiveness, sustainability, and quality. The Transition Pathway for Tourism and the strategic emphasis on "tourism for all" reflect a matured understanding that accessibility generates economic value through the significant spending power of persons with disabilities and senior travelers, extension of tourism seasons, and enhancement of overall destination quality that benefits all visitors.

However, Bulgaria's national tourism policy demonstrates only partial absorption of this European framework. While the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 and the transposition of the European Accessibility Act create enabling conditions for accessible environments and services, the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism 2014–2030 does not position accessible tourism as an explicit strategic priority. Accessibility remains implicit, embedded in general goals for infrastructure improvement and service quality, rather than articulated as a distinct policy objective with dedicated measures, indicators, and accountability mechanisms. This represents a missed opportunity to leverage Bulgaria's legal and social policy infrastructure for tourism sector development, and reflects insufficient coordination between disability policy, urban planning, transport, and tourism governance.

At Sofia's destination level, this fragmentation intensifies. The municipal tourism governance system demonstrates awareness of European trends (through CityDNA membership and exposure to the Global Accessibility Report) and partial responsiveness (the measure targeting senior tourists 55+ in the Action Plan). Yet accessibility remains weakly integrated across the destination management value chain. The Communication Strategy's finding that "conditions for persons with disabilities" scored lowest (3.48/5.0) among all evaluated tourism parameters provides empirical evidence of implementation gaps. Significantly, this low score is acknowledged but not translated into strategic action, as the Communication Strategy does not develop targeted messaging for accessible tourism segments, nor does it position "tourism for all" as a brand differentiator for Sofia. The tourism value chain concept is critical here: accessible tourism requires continuity across information/planning, transport, accommodation, attractions, and ancillary services. A single inaccessible link -

whether a non-adapted metro station, an inaccessible website, or lack of information in alternative formats - can render an entire destination functionally inaccessible, regardless of individual accessible facilities.

From a destination management perspective, accessible tourism represents an underutilized strategic asset for Sofia. The demographic trends (ageing European population, 16% of population with disabilities) point to growing market demand. The economic argument is compelling: accessible tourism generates higher per-capita spending, longer stays, and travel outside peak seasons, directly addressing Sofia's goals for year-round tourism and economic sustainability.

Additionally, Sofia Municipality should leverage its CityDNA membership more strategically, using the network to benchmark against leading accessible tourism destinations, participate in capacity-building initiatives, and potentially position itself for future European recognition.

The broader theoretical implication is that destination management in the 21st century must internalize accessibility as a fundamental dimension of destination competitiveness, not a compliance burden or social welfare adjunct. The European framework provides the normative foundation, but implementation remains stubbornly uneven. Urban destinations like Sofia sit at a critical juncture: the policy infrastructure is largely in place (through EU directives and national transposition), demographic and market trends are favorable, and international networks offer knowledge transfer, but transformation requires political commitment, cross-sectoral coordination, and systematic embedding of accessibility in destination management processes.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of accessible tourism in urban environments requires a coordinated, systemic approach that encompasses all stages of the tourist experience: from the planning phase and access to information, through transport and the urban environment, to attractions, accommodation, and ancillary services. This demands knowledge and skills for creating structures designed for all people, which lies at the core of the concept of accessible tourism (Eichhorn & Buhalis, 2011). Such an approach is based on the value chain of accessible tourism - a complex system of interconnected elements that together create a complete experience for tourists (Song, Liu, & Chen, 2013). In the European context, this logic underpins the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, the European Accessibility Act, and initiatives such as the Transition Pathway for Tourism, the Access City Award, and the European Capital of Smart Tourism, which view accessibility not as an additional "bonus," but as a necessity for sustainable and inclusive development.

The national framework in Bulgaria largely reflects these European trends: policies for persons with disabilities and the introduction of accessibility requirements for products and services create important preconditions for developing an accessible environment, transport, and communication, which can also be leveraged in tourism. At the same time, the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism and related documents do not identify accessible tourism as a separate priority area, but rather include it indirectly through measures for infrastructure modernization, service quality improvement, and sustainable territorial development. This places the country in a situation where there is normative and strategic potential for the development of accessible tourism, but no clearly defined strategic response to European requirements and trends in the field of "tourism for all."

The analysis of Sofia specifies this picture in an urban context. The capital has an institutional structure for tourism management, a long-term strategy for development as a

tourism destination, an action plan, annual programs and a communication strategy, as well as diverse tourism resources and, accordingly, significant potential for developing urban and peri-urban forms of tourism, yet this potential remains only partially realized. At the same time, data from the communication strategy show that conditions for persons with disabilities are among the lowest-rated elements of the tourism environment from the perspective of foreign visitors, which clearly signals deficits in accessibility. In strategic and program documents, accessible tourism is not framed as a distinct priority: accessibility appears indirectly through objectives related to modernization, quality, and year-round utilization, and the only clearer points of contact are measures aimed at attracting senior tourists (55+). Sofia's membership in City Destinations Alliance indicates that the city has access to knowledge, tools, and networks that can support such an integrated approach.

This process of continuous improvement is crucial for building inclusive and competitive destinations where accessibility is not perceived as an additional service but as a foundation of sustainable tourism development and social inclusion. Moreover, improving accessibility in transport, the urban environment, and tourism services generates real benefits for local residents as well (Organización Mundial del Turismo, 2015), which can serve as additional motivation for institutional cooperation, directing investment, and implementing targeted policies. This turns accessibility into a strategic choice that supports equal access and social inclusion, but also enhances economic competitiveness, improves the reputation of destinations, and stimulates sustainable tourism.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE TOURISM: BETWEEN CRITICAL ISSUES AND PROSPECTS, A GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

Angela Miccio[1]

ABSTRACT. This paper highlights the importance of accessible and inclusive tourism -between critical and prospective - as a great opportunity for all. Twenty years after the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by Italy in 2009, accessible and inclusive tourism is recognized as a fundamental right and a strategic economic lever, yet many barriers remain, primarily cultural! The current situation shows that the medical model of disability still prevails. The transition from a welfare system based on social protection to a welfare system based on inclusion is still far away. The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of human dignity, inclusion, and accessibility, which do not concern a small minority. The research method used involves an analysis of reality, giving voice to the whole person, and a comparative analysis with a connection to disability studies and an analysis of the reality of pre- and post-pandemic accessibility. The results will demonstrate that inclusion cannot be symbolic. All inclusion efforts must be anchored in one principle: Nothing about us without us. It cannot be outsourced to technical consultant alone. Accessible and inclusive tourism is a fundamental part of any tourism approach that seeks to be defined as sustainable. It's not just about breaking down architectural barriers. The focus is no longer on the offering, but on the individual. The approach to accessible and inclusive tourism must be based on human rights. Accessible tourism is a matter of human rights and concerns everyone, representing a great opportunity.

KEYWORDS: human rights, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), inclusion, accessibility, nothing about us without us

INTRODUCTION AND ACTUALITY.

This paper highlights the importance of accessible and inclusive tourism - between critical and prospectives - as a great opportunity for all. Twenty years after the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by Italy in 2009, accessible and inclusive tourism is recognized as a fundamental right and a strategic economic lever, yet many barriers remain, primarily cultural. The current situation shows that the medical model of disability still prevails. The transition from a welfare system based on social protection to a welfare system based on inclusion is still far away. The importance of human dignity, inclusion, and accessibility do not concern a small minority. Recognition of the dignity of a person presupposes active respect for human rights (Nussbaum, 2002; Nussbaum,2007; Barton & Armstrong, 1999; Lawson, 2005). The independent living of people with disabilities is not taken into consideration. The most recent theorizing in the ethics of care and the capability approach as a useful tool for an integrated approach (Nussbaum, 2007; Sen, 2009) have not been carefully considered. When people in conditions of extreme dependence are accorded little dignity, the dignity of those who provide care is also nullified (Nussbaum, 2007). The caregiver is exposed to the so – called Burden, which is a state of chronic stress. In 2009 in Stockholm to Elizabeth Blackburn was awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine for her studies on the involvement of telomere and telomerase in premature aging and reduced ageing life expectancy and poor health of family caregivers. Family caregivers live from 9 to 17 years less than everyone else! (Epel et al., 2004). People with disabilities, siblings, family caregivers are still invisible figures. They

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make a precious and unique contribution to improving society. In Italy, the recognition of family caregivers has not yet been achieved with all the necessary safeguards. From 2013 to 2025, approximately 30 bills on the topic of family caregivers were submitted, none of which reached final approval. Only in 2015 was the definition of caregiver included in paragraph 255 of the 2018 budget law implemented. The 2026 caregiver framework bill must now be discussed and approved in Parliament (source: Italian government, Ministry for disabilities) , a process that will take months, and amendments and expansions are hoped for before it becomes law. There has been a lot of criticism from family caregivers and associations because the text highlights serious shortcomings, especially in terms of social security and structural employment protections, and so on.

The preamble to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognizes the importance of accessibility to the physical, social, economic, and cultural environment, to health and education, and to information and communication, to enable persons with disabilities to fully enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms (United Nations, 2006, p.1). Article 9 of the UN Convention on Accessibility (UNCPRD) requires that obstacles and barriers to accessibility be identified and eliminated in all possible areas of a person with a disability's life. Also important is the reference to Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Participation in Cultural Life, Recreation, Leisure and Sport). It is useful to underline the commitment of the States that have signed the Convention to take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to sporting, recreational and tourist facilities. The 1948 "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" must be considered as a premise for "Accessible Tourism" (articles 1, 2 ,24).

According to a 2023 study by the WHO (World Health Organization,2023), there were approximately 1.3 billion people worldwide with a significant and ,according to the World Health Organization, the number of people with disabilities will double by 2050. Another figure, provided in 2022 by the European Commission with the Transition Pathway for Tourism, highlighted that over 87 million people in Europe have a disability, that 20% of the continent's population was over 65, and that 41% of overnight stays were made by tourists over 55.

Remaining in the over-65 age group, 47% of them do not sleep away from home due to health-related problems and barriers, and therefore it is necessary to adapt facilities, both in terms of safety and healthcare accessibility, ensuring travelers access to treatment, even abroad. In reality, this could translate into the use of electronic health services, electronic prescriptions, and electronic health records. Furthermore, according to a 2024 report by the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism,2024), a specialized agency of the United Nations, people with disabilities typically travel with two or three family members/companions, generating a much higher demand for hospitality and services than other travelers.

This potential market is too often underestimated, yet it could make a significant contribution to the tourism area.

In Europe, accessible tourism generates annual revenues of €400 billion and is expected to grow by 1% annually in the coming years. This type of tourism represents 3% of the EU's total GDP and supports 9 million jobs. However, only 9% of tourism services in the European Union are accessible. There would be a potential 44% increase in demand for accessible tourism per year if appropriate services were available. An additional 1.2 million businesses would need to provide accessible services to meet future demand. These improvements could attract up to 75% more international travelers. (World Summit on Accessible Tourism (WSAT) – Destinations for All 2025). During the 3rd World Summit for Accessible Tourism (WSAT) in Tourin, the main findings of the Accessible and Inclusive Tourism Report were presented,

highlighting how accessible tourism is currently a rapidly growing sector: between 2019 and 2023, average revenue grew by 28.8%, with peaks of 51.3% for small businesses that invested in accessibility, and investment in the sector increased by 49%.

According to the latest Istat data, there are approximately 3.15 million potential tourists living with some form of disability, and it must be taken into account that these travelers are always accompanied by two or three people. A huge potential market for travel and tourism, yet it remains largely undervalued due to inaccessible tourist facilities and services, policies that fail to address the needs of all guests, and the lack of knowledge and expertise among industry professionals. Indeed, globally, it is estimated that the lack of adequate facilities and services leads to annual losses of approximately €142 billion and 3.4 million jobs (European Network for Accessible Tourism, Accessible Tourism Demand Study, 2014"). The economic potential of the sector is also confirmed by the results of a study conducted by MMGY Travel Intelligence for the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT), in April 2025 that found that, on average, European travelers with mobility and accessibility needs spent $3,163 in total (excluding (flights) for international leisure trips with overnight stays in the last twelve months, taking an average of 2.1 international trips in the same period. This valuable and growing market requires reliable and clear accessibility information from suppliers to ensure safe and comfortable travel—while also representing a significant market opportunity for destinations and businesses that invest in and promote their accessibility conditions.

Accessible and inclusive tourism is a fundamental part of any tourism approach that wants to be defined as sustainable. When we talk about accessibility, we focus on people with disabilities and little else. In reality, it's an area that affects a much broader population, sharing needs that aren't solely related to medical conditions. When discussing accessibility and inclusivity, we should first consider the needs of individuals: Families with small children in wheelchairs, those with food intolerances or special dietary needs; senior citizens; people with temporary disabilities, people with motor and sensory disabilities (blind, visually impaired, deaf, and hearing impaired), as well as cognitive and behavioral disabilities and health conditions, including temporary disabilities. Too often, everything is reduced to motor disability, understood as the use of a wheelchair, without any understanding of the full range of needs that can arise in a person's life, even for short periods. The World Health Organization itself states that disability (even temporary) is a universal experience: everyone will experience it throughout their life. Too often, facilities are marketed as accessible simply because they comply with regulations regarding architectural barriers and have a certain number of accessible rooms. It's no longer a question of accessibility; what's missing today is quality (Vitali, CEO and founder of Village for All,2021). We need to think about tourism for ALL to better accommodate those with disabilities and further accommodate those with similar or similar needs, such as seniors or families with children.

Accessible and inclusive tourism represents a fundamental frontier for the modern tourism sector, transforming the right to a vacation into a concrete opportunity for everyone, regardless of physical, sensorial, or cognitive abilities. This is not just an act of civility or social inclusion, but a real economic opportunity, as it involves people with disabilities, the elderly, families with young children, and anyone with specific needs.

The actual picture highlights that despite progress made, several barriers still hinder universal accessibility: lack of adequate housing; inaccessible public transportation and inadequate roads and pedestrian paths; lack of clear and reliable information on the accessibility of places and facilities, which makes travel planning difficult; lack of qualified and trained personnel to accommodate people with specific needs; and differences in accessibility standards between destinations and countries.

Among the prospects and opportunities—as previously highlighted—accessible tourism is a growing market with significant economic potential.

Tourists with specific needs often travel outside of peak seasons. Accessible websites and apps that provide detailed information to map the accessibility of itineraries should be implemented. A "Design for All" approach should be adopted, meaning infrastructure and services should be designed to be accessible to all from the outset, integrating accessibility into sustainable tourism.

Future strategies include promoting professional training for tourism personnel to ensure quality hospitality and adopting clear standards and accessibility certifications to ensure reliable information. Programs and funding, such as "Holidays for All," need to be developed to promote access to vacations.

Inclusive tourism is therefore not just a necessity for a portion of the population, but an opportunity for development, improvement, and growth for the entire tourism system. The most common communication mistake is represented by accessibility claims. People with disabilities are not a "standard." Accessibility is a highly personal condition that varies depending on the individual, their culture, age, personal aspirations, etc. The fact is that accessibility has always been understood as "accessible to wheelchair users."

Until twenty years ago, people associated accessible tourism solely with architectural barriers in hotels. Even just 10 years ago, accessibility was perceived as a cost and a nuisance, and the potential of accessibility was not fully understood. Even today, it can be said that these potentials are not fully understood, and there are many critical issues.

The aging of the European population, the growth of the senior segment, and increased attention to the rights of people with disabilities are expanding the potential demand. Companies that invest in accessibility: • attract new international customers; • strengthen their reputation; • promote seasonal adjustment and local development; • improve the quality and stability of revenues.

In a global context marked by demographic transformations and new social sensitivities, accessible tourism remains a strategic direction for the future of Italian and global tourism, capable of integrating growth, inclusion, and sustainability into a more solid and competitive development model.

There is also a deontological factor: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 reaffirm the right of persons with disabilities to equal access to tourism facilities, including travel experiences, hospitality, and cultural participation.

In this new perspective, accessible and inclusive tourism is also considered a "lever of social justice," where accessibility becomes a fundamental component of a modern, sustainable tourism vision oriented toward the rights of all.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.

The research method used involves an analysis of reality, giving voice to the whole person, and a comparative analysis with a connection to disability studies and an analysis of the reality of pre- and post-pandemic accessibility. It is very important to give voice to humble and hidden heroics, to everyday heroes. Giving voice to those who are now tired, giving voice to stories, experiences of immense value and great example, destroyed by injustice. The human person is the bearer of intrinsic, permanent and unconditional dignity. Dignity is not a principle that can be defined univocally. It must be thought of as a process rather than a definitive result. This leads to framing dignity in a relational perspective. Respecting human rights means protecting the dignity of the person. Disability is a human rights issue! It is necessary to move

- thanks also to the contribution of Disability Studies (in general, for an introduction to DS: Barnes & Mercer,2004; Barnes,2007; Charlton,2000;Morris,2000;Coleridge,1993;Ingstad & Reynolds,1995; Oliver,1996; Priestley,2003; Shakespeare & Watson,2002; Shakespeare,2002;Id.,1994) - from the medical /individualistic approach where the focus is on the individual's impairment and the person is seen as the problem and treatments as the adequate response - to the social / contextual model of disability where the focus is instead on the social and environmental context and it sees discrimination/exclusion as the problem and the removal of barriers as the answer and then some rigidities must be overcome. In reality, the social model does not set aside the individual and pathological condition of the person and does not deny suffering and the need for medical care but it chooses to place emphasis on shared aspects (discrimination and the condition of social oppression). It is necessary to implement emancipatory research work which is taking its first steps. Disability is a human rights issue. It's not about guaranteeing or maintaining privileges but it's about equality of opportunity, removing existing barriers/preventing discrimination. The United Nations Convention is not "special" but universal. At the basis of the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities there is a new model of justice(Amartya,2009). Disability Studies are interdisciplinary, internal and external to the academic world. They are for (and with) people and not about people. The approach in disability studies is new. Disability Studies have provided the knowledge that informs the international legal framework for protecting the human rights of people with disabilities. Disability Studies provide jurists with a deeper understanding of the fact on which the legal rule is based. Legal research and practice can benefit from Disability Studies to achieve the effective inclusion of people with disabilities. Legal research seeks and explains the appropriate rules of conduct to prevent/resolve conflicts between citizens. It is not theoretical; its purpose is practical: to resolve people's problems. Distinctions between facts are inherent in legal experience. Legal research involves a formal and abstract process. It's important to identify the elements which "create" a relevant object for the law. In our case, the fact considered is "disability". Legal rule starts from the fact, operates on it, and returns to the fact. Disability is a human rights issue.

The analysis of reality highlights how after Covid, accessibility for tourism has become even more of an opportunity. There's a lot of talk about a different way of traveling and being a tourist after Covid: a slower tourism, one that seeks encounters and connections with local communities. The post-pandemic era presents a huge opportunity to ensure that accessibility is less of a niche and more of a tourism-wide concern. Accessibility is an opportunity for all destinations and facilities that are trying to understand how to improve their tourist offerings. Accessibility means giving people the freedom to choose their own destination. It means empowerment and inclusivity. Accessibility can't be limited to a single structure or a single element. An accessible hotel in itself doesn't make a difference in the enjoyment of a holiday. What does the tourist do? Do they come to stay in their room? What matters is the "accessibility chain." All services in the area must be accessible and connected. After the pandemic, the tourism sector had the opportunity to introduce new paradigms to address market, climate, and demographic changes, placing the needs of individual guests at the center.

RESULTS.

The results demonstrate that inclusion cannot be symbolic. All inclusion efforts must be anchored in one principle: Nothing about us without us. It cannot be outsourced to technical consultant alone. Accessible and inclusive tourism is a fundamental part of any tourism approach that seeks to be defined as sustainable. It's not just about breaking down architectural barriers. The focus is no longer on the offering, but on the individual. It should be underlined

that inclusion added later often means barriers, delays, and unequal outcomes. Inclusion designed from the beginning builds stronger systems and sustainable success. Inclusion must be part of the foundation, not an afterthought. Inclusion as disability justice consists of nine key words: 1) interdependence. Building a society around interdependence rather individualism creates space for everyone; 2) Nothing About us Without us. The foundational principle of disability rights. 3) Community Inclusion. Ending all forms of segregation, institutions, isolated housing, separate school, separate beaches etc. Not "special" spaces, but barrier – free participation everywhere. 4) Leadership (Disabled – Led); 5) Universal Design; 6) Structural Change; 7) Intersectionality; 8) Opportunity & Access. Real opportunity, not charity. Accessible education that doesn't segregate. True inclusion requires: co- creation with persons with disabilities; continuous feedback loops; leadership accountability; budget commitment; measurable indicators; regular review cycles. People are very important! The It is necessary - for a correct approach to disability and to create a new concept of disability - to move from the logic of help as a favor to the logic of help as a right of the person with disability for real inclusion in society and for an independent life (Parker & Clements,2008). It is necessary to move on to the new concept of disability. The model of disability that the Convention has produced must be made effective (Parker & Clements,2008; Koch,2009; Flynn,2011). This model allows us to move from a welfare based on social protection to a welfare based on social inclusion!

DISCUSSION.

The third edition of the World Summit on Accessible Tourism – Destinations for All 2025 took place for the first time in Italy, in Turin. in October 2025. The first Summit was held in 2014 in Montreal, Quebec, under the auspices of the Canadian association Kéroul and with the participation of the UNWTO, the UN, the European Network for Accessible Tourism, and ICAO. Following this event, the "A World for All" Declaration was adopted: a document, available in 10 languages, which includes 40 specific measures to implement the World Tourism Organization (WTO) recommendations for inclusive tourism at the international level and in their respective countries. The second summit was held in Brussels, Belgium, in 2018. Organized by Kéroul and the Wallonia-Brussels Accessibility Collective (CAWaB), the event was attended by over 400 delegates representing 266 organizations from 42 countries.

Accessible tourism has a lot of potential, but few people are aware of it yet. For a mature approach to accessible tourism, infrastructural interventions and regulatory adjustments are not sufficient, but a radical cultural change is necessary first and foremost.

Many people think that accessibility simply means providing a job beach wheelchair, for example. This is also due to misinformation and the actions of certain associations, etc., aimed at spreading the wrong messages for their own convenience, laziness, and –seriously- empty self-promotion, lack of training, misinformation and ignorance. It's also important to seriously reflect on how accessibility, if misinterpreted as the creation of spaces and services dedicated exclusively to people with disabilities, can itself become a form of discrimination and segregation rather than inclusion!

CONCLUSIONS.

The approach to accessible and inclusive tourism must be based on human rights. Accessible tourism is a matter of human rights and concerns everyone, representing a great opportunity. Accessible and inclusive tourism is not a separate segment, but a lens through which to rethink the entire tourism development model. Accessible tourism is also an evolving system that follows social, cultural, market, and communication developments. While initially,

the focus was on having a room with an accessible bathroom that had certain amenities to be considered "compliant," the demand has now changed. Accessibility has never been a reason for vacation; people go on vacation to find an answer to their desires, aspirations, to live an experience, like all tourists. People with disabilities who travel are tourists. Disabilities don't go on vacation. People do." Innovation isn't about generically speaking about hospitality, but about accessible hospitality. Truly welcoming means recognizing people's complexity and offering them the freedom to choose, transforming those with specific needs into informed and active consumers. An approach that makes hospitality fairer and, above all, more accessible to everyone. Accessibility has never been a reason for vacation; people go on vacation to find an answer to their desires, aspirations, to live an experience, like all tourists. People with disabilities who travel are tourists. To each their own vacation (Vitali,2021).

Accessible tourism is not only a cultural achievement and a fundamental right, but also an extraordinary opportunity to enhance destinations, enrich tourism offerings, and build a more inclusive and sustainable society. Investing in accessibility means breaking down not only physical barriers, but also cultural and social ones, offering everyone the opportunity to travel, learn, experience, and grow. Experiences gathered, technological innovations, and best practices demonstrate that barrier-free travel is possible, provided there is attention, training, and a genuine willingness to listen to the needs of each individual. For a destination to be truly accessible, it's not enough to have well-equipped and adequate accommodations; it must also have accessible transportation, clear signage, accessible public spaces, and effective support services. Essentially, an accessible tourist destination is one where the entire community functions at its best for everyone: more welcoming, more orderly, more attentive to detail and the dignity of each individual. (World Summit on Accessible Tourism – Destinations for All 2025)

The vision of accessible tourism that emerged in Turin, during the recent World Summit on Accessible Tourism, is that for a mature approach to accessible tourism, infrastructural interventions and regulatory adjustments are not sufficient, but what is needed, first and foremost, is a radical cultural change and a strategic vision on the part of businesses and institutions.

Therefore, accessibility itself must no longer concern only hospitality, but must involve the territory as a whole, so that a destination will be truly inclusive only if the surrounding ecosystem is able to effectively respond to people's needs, with action that goes beyond the elimination of material and social barriers. The future of tourism depends on inclusion: making cities, facilities, and services accessible is not only a moral and legal duty, but a strategic choice that rewards those who make it.

The Third World Summit for Accessible Tourism concluded with the adoption of the "Torino Manifesto on Tourism for All 2025," a policy document that defines a new global agenda for accessible tourism, continuing the Montreal (2014) and Brussels (2018) declarations. The Manifesto, developed with contributions from government representatives, disability organizations, tourism industry bodies, universities, and international organizations, is based on the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Torino Call for Action 2025, at the heart of the Manifesto, invites all tourism stakeholders—institutions, businesses, cultural operators, trainers, and technology developers—to make accessibility a structural pillar of the sector's policies and strategies, through concrete actions: • integrating the principles of Universal Design into destination and service planning;• promoting mandatory accessibility training for tourism professionals and the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace;• adopt common international standards and publish clear, up-to-date information on the accessibility

of facilities and services;• encourage the co-design of tourism experiences with organizations representing people with disabilities;• develop inclusive technologies and digital solutions—from artificial intelligence to augmented reality—to improve traveler independence, usability, and safety.

The Manifesto also proposes the creation of a Global Observatory on Accessible Tourism, tasked with monitoring progress, sharing best practices, and providing guidance to destinations around the world. As the document states: "Tourism for all is not just a destination to be reached, but a collective journey towards dignified and joyful travel experiences for every person." (World Summit on Accessible Tourism (WSAT) – Destinations for All 2025).

Accessible tourism is not about 'them,' people with disabilities, and 'us,' those without. It's about everyone, because sooner or later, everyone will need accessible services to travel and enjoy the tourism experience. (WSAT, 2015)

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TOURISM AND SHORT-STAY FACILITIES IN EUROPE: ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS ASPECTS*

Guido Migliaccio[1], Mirko Mozzillo[2]

ABSTRACT: *Recently, the short-term rental (STR) sector has taken on an increasingly important role in the European tourism economy, transforming the accommodation landscape. Despite the spread of the phenomenon, the literature has devoted little attention to the comparative analysis of the economic and financial performance of companies operating in this field. This study analyses a sample of 29,167 companies in the NACE Rev. 2 55.20 sector in France, Italy, and the United Kingdom for the period 2015–2024, using balance sheet data from the Orbis Europe database. The analysis applies cluster analysis (K-means) to identify homogeneous groups of companies based on dimensional variables (turnover, total assets and number of employees). Subsequently, two financial balance sheet ratios are examined: Return on Assets (ROA) and Financial Leverage. The results show strong polarisation in the sector, dominated by microenterprises. However, there are no statistically significant differences in operational performance or financial structures between the identified clusters. This suggests that size is not a determinant of cost-efficiency. Rather, organisational adaptability and the use of digital platforms seem more relevant to business resilience to tourism shocks. The study contributes to the emerging literature on STRs by providing one of the first large-scale financial analyses based on balance sheet data and by proposing new research directions on operational efficiency and business resilience in digital tourism.*

KEYWORDS: *Short-Term Rentals; Tourism Economics; Cluster Analysis; Financial Performance; Resilience.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the short-stay accommodation sector, classified under NACE Rev. 2 code 55.20, has played an increasingly important role in tourism development. The spread of digital platforms has expanded the accommodation offer and favoured the entry of new operators (Kim et al., 2025). This process has generated significant economic effects, contributing to income creation, employment and tax revenue. According to Oxford Economics (2025), short-stay facilities in the European Union generated an economic impact of around €149 billion and supported more than 2.1 million jobs.

However, the sector's growth is accompanied by significant organisational heterogeneity. In fact, individual and family micro-enterprises operate (especially in Italy and France) up to professional operators specialised in the management of real estate portfolios

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* *This study is the result of the collaboration between the two authors who jointly designed it. Guido Migliaccio proposed the theme, framing it in economic-business studies and drawing the main reflections. He is therefore responsible for the paragraphs "Introduction", "Review of the literature and research hypotheses", "Hypothesis testing and discussion" and "Conclusions, implications, limits and future developments". Mirko Mozzillo, on the other hand, has obtained the balance sheet data by processing them, also in relation to market trends. The following paragraphs can therefore be attributed to him: "Methodology", "Market analysis", "Results and first evaluations".*

This paper is an extension of previous research presented at the AIDEA 2026 Conference (Italian Academy of Business Administration), held in Milan on 22 and 23 January 2026. In that contribution, the same dataset was used to analyze additional economic-financial ratios. The work will be published in the proceedings of the conference: reference is made to it for a more extensive discussion of the topic. In this study, however, the focus is on the evolution of other ratios, which allow us to complete the analysis of the performance of companies in the sector.

Artificial intelligence tools were used for text processing and translation.

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(Alberca & Parte, 2020; Ndaguba & van Zyl, 2023). It is therefore necessary to reflect on the actual economic and financial performance to assess these companies' ability to adapt to changing contexts.

Despite the growing academic attention, the literature has devoted relatively little to the comparative analysis of the economic and financial performance of companies in the sector based on balance sheet data, especially when organised using cluster analysis, a widely used method for identifying strategic market segments (Alberca & Parte, 2020). In a context of frequent external shocks, as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gyódi, 2022), the use of comparable financial indicators is particularly useful for understanding the sector's evolution.

This study assesses the financial statements of 29,167 companies operating in the short-stay accommodation sector in France, Italy and the United Kingdom in the period 2015-2024. The analysis uses K-means clustering to identify homogeneous groups of companies based on dimensional variables such as turnover, total assets, and number of employees.

The aim is to outline the different organisational models in the sector and assess how profitability and operational flexibility affect companies' ability to withstand systemic shocks.

The literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, and results of the empirical analysis are presented in this order. The work concludes with a discussion of the economic and business implications that emerged from the survey.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

2.1. MATURITY OF LITERATURE: A BIBLIOMETRIC READING

To evaluate the scientific development of studies on short-term rentals (STR), a brief bibliometric analysis was conducted on the Scopus database. The research, carried out in July 2025, used the string "hospitality AND short-term AND stays AND tourism" across the title, abstract, and keyword fields; it identified only 11 contributions, which, however, show limited but growing interest.

Scientific production is mainly led by Spain, followed by the United States: the phenomenon has been analysed with localised studies.

The analysis of citations confirms the field's limited theoretical stratification. The most cited contributions – including Gyódi (2022), Flowers (2019), Fountain (2018) and Ndaguba (2023) – remain a few points of reference in the literature.

Keyword mapping in VOSviewer shows 62 keywords, but only one – *Airbnb* – appears more than once. In general, however, the semantic network remains poorly integrated, characterised by strong conceptual dispersion and the absence of well-defined thematic clusters. Some interdisciplinary poles related to tourism, hospitality management, local economy, and performance evaluation emerge, but they are often grounded primarily in specific territorial contexts.

Overall, the bibliometric analysis suggests that the literature on STRs is still in an early stage of development. However, some common lines of research emerge that can be well integrated with a quantitative analysis of the sector's economic and financial performance.

2.2. INDUSTRY TRANSFORMATION AND OPERATING MODELS

The phenomenon of short-term rentals (STR) is linked to the traditional "sharing economy", understood as the shared use of "underused resources". An interpretation that is now partial and no longer sufficient to explain the competitive dynamics of the sector (Guttentag, 2015; Miguel et al., 2024). Digital platforms have, in fact, changed the hospitality market, introducing new organisational models and favouring operators with more structured entrepreneurial logics (Kim et al., 2025).

On the one hand, the original dimension of peer-to-peer sharing remains, based on

informal hospitality and the use of private living spaces.

On the other hand, there is a progressive professionalisation of the offer, led by operators specialised in the management of multiple properties and oriented towards maximising profitability (Ndaguba & van Zyl, 2023).

This evolution has been interpreted as a transition towards forms of *platform capitalism*, in which the digital platform is no longer just an intermediary channel, but a real infrastructure for the development of entrepreneurial activities in the tourism market (Adamiak, 2019; Miguel et al., 2024).

An indicator of this transformation is the growing presence of so-called *multi-listing hosts*, i.e. operators who manage property portfolios and treat tourist accommodation as a stable economic asset (Adamiak, 2019).

The distinction between amateur hosts and professional operators therefore does not only concern the number of properties managed, but also the decision-making logic and the economic-financial objectives pursued (Leick et al., 2024). While the former often operate to supplement household income, the latter adopt tools typical of the hotel industry, such as revenue management, dynamic pricing and data-driven demand management (Miguel et al., 2024).

This differentiation of business models also affects the sector's performance. Professional operators can leverage technical expertise and economies of scale, for example, by optimising positioning on OTA channels and coordinating the management of multiple facilities (Adamiak, 2019; Kwok & Xie, 2019). On the contrary, small hosts maintain a competitive advantage of a qualitative nature, linked to the perception of authenticity of the tourist experience and the ability to generate *Memorable Tourism Experiences* (MTEs) (González-Reverté et al., 2025; Leick et al., 2024).

The change in the sector has also generated significant challenges, especially in the most renowned centres, as it has reduced housing supply for residents and increased rents (Fuinhas et al., 2025). Therefore, many policymakers have introduced new regulations.

2.3 FINANCIAL STRUCTURE, OPERATIONAL FLEXIBILITY AND PERFORMANCE

In the traditional hotel sector, company size is often considered a determining factor in economic and financial performance, thanks to the potential for economies of scale and the development of more structured managerial skills (Singh & Schmidgall, 2013). In the short-term rental sector, this relationship is less obvious, as companies' competitiveness depends heavily on operational flexibility and the ability to adapt quickly to changes in tourism demand.

In fact, the literature shows that in tourism markets characterised by high volatility, companies with more flexible organisational models tend to be more resilient to external shocks (Brouder, 2020; Hall et al., 2020). In the context of STRs, this flexibility can result from both lightweight operational configurations and less rigid financial structures, enabling operators to adjust their offerings and operating costs quickly.

As a result, the performance of companies in the sector does not seem to depend solely on size, but also on the combination of operational efficiency and financial structure. This perspective suggests the usefulness of jointly analysing profitability and debt indicators to understand better the economic and financial dynamics of companies operating in the short-term rentals market.

It therefore seems appropriate to empirically verify whether the operational efficiency and financial structure of companies in the sector differ systematically across operators of different sizes and whether these differences are reflected in their ability to adapt to market shocks. From this perspective, derive the research hypotheses that were then formulated.

2.4. FORMULATION OF RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The literature on traditional hospitality has often interpreted economic and financial performance in the light of company size, hypothesising that larger firms can benefit from economies of scale and more structured managerial skills (Brown & Dev, 1999; Chen, 2011). In the short-term rental market, this relationship appears less evident. The spread of digital platforms and the reduction of barriers to entry allow even small operators to achieve levels of efficiency comparable to those of more structured companies, thanks to dynamic pricing tools, online reputation, and flexible supply management (Guttentag, 2015; Mody et al., 2021). In this context, company size may not be a significant determinant of operational efficiency.

H1. *In the STR sector, operational efficiency, as measured by ROA, is not affected by company size.*

A second important element concerns companies' financial structure. The economic-business literature shows that the use of debt capital can serve as a growth tool but can also pose risks, especially in sectors characterised by high demand volatility (Sohn et al., 2013). In the tourism sector, differences in financial Leverage may reflect different management models and affect companies' economic and financial stability.

H2. *Leverage levels differ across firms in different-sized clusters.*

Finally, the literature on organisational resilience in tourism underlines how the ability to adapt to crises depends on the flexibility of operational and financial structures (Brouder, 2020; Hall et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020). In the short-term rentals sector, characterised by heterogeneous business models and a strong dependence on tourism demand, it is plausible that companies across different size clusters exhibit distinct dynamics in the recovery process following exogenous shocks.

H3. *Size clusters show different trajectories of operational efficiency (ROA) in the post-pandemic shock period.*

3. METHODOLOGY

In the presence of sector heterogeneity, the literature has often used statistical segmentation tools, such as cluster analysis (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 2009). In its most common application, the K-means method partitions observations into clusters by minimising the variance within groups and maximising the differences between groups (MacQueen, 1967; Everitt et al., 2011).

In the business environment, it has enabled the identification of different organisational models and the analysis of their comparative performance (Ketchen & Shook, 1996), especially in hotels or spas (Singh & Schmidgall, 2013; Vašaničová et al., 2025).

In this research, the use of dimensional variables such as turnover, total assets, and number of employees enables the identification of groups of companies with similar operational characteristics and the verification of whether company size actually represents a determining factor of economic and financial performance in a market characterised by high dynamism.

The evaluation of economic performance draws value not so much from the simple reading of financial statements, but from the technical analysis of indices and flows consistent with the activity carried out. Based on the Orbis Europe database managed by Moody's, the research analyses the period 2015-2024, focusing on the following indicators:

1) ROA;

2) Leverage ratio.

The survey methodology involved, in the first instance, the use of the K-Means algorithm to segment the sample into three distinct groupings. This clustering technique was applied by cross-referencing three key dimensional variables: turnover, total assets and number

of employees. The choice of the K-Means technique responds to the need to obtain transparent and interpretable clusters, minimising intra-group variance (MacQueen, 1967) and facilitating the identification of homogeneous economic models (Everitt et al., 2011; Jain, 2010). The distribution has generated a strongly polarised structure:

1. Cluster 1: 29,144 companies;
2. Cluster 2: 21 companies;
3. Cluster 3: 2 companies; top market player.

The number of observations varies per year depending on the availability of financial statements in Orbis; The annual statistics reflect this coverage. To ensure robust results, the dataset was subjected to preliminary outlier removal. Finally, statistical validity was supported by a comprehensive descriptive analysis, including mean, median, standard deviation, variance, skewness and value ranges (min-max). The ANOVA test was later introduced to determine whether the observed differences between the means of the three groups were statistically robust. In line with the literature (Johnson, 2007), the test assesses whether to accept:

1. the null hypothesis (H0): the equality between the means of the various groupings;
2. the alternative hypothesis (H1): the discontinuity in the data of at least one area.

To address the ANOVA limitations, the Tukey-Kramer test (Tukey, 1993) is applied, which allows comparisons among clusters and makes explicit the diversity relationships that emerged during the study.

4. MARKET ANALYSIS

The short-stay accommodation sector (NACE Rev.2 code 55.20) has now established itself as a major player in the development of national tourism. Its ability to offer flexible solutions generates economic repercussions that go beyond the boundaries of the individual structure. The expansion of this market, in fact, not only generates income for hospitality but also stimulates the entire local ecosystem, promoting employment and proximity trade and providing an essential contribution to public finances through taxation.

The sector is not just a component of tourism but a €149 billion economic engine (Oxford Economics, 2025) that is redefining the face of European cities. While digitalisation has democratised market access for small family businesses, it has also raised urgent questions about the sustainability of local real estate markets. Recent studies confirm, in fact, the direct link between the expansion of the short-term tourist offer and rising housing costs for residents (Fuinhas et al., 2025). Understanding the geographical and numerical distribution of these companies is the first step in assessing post-pandemic adaptation strategies and the weight of national regulations. The data for the major European players for the period 2015-2023 (latest available) are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of companies

Country	*2015*	*2023*	*Growth*
Portugal	798	5.740	86%
Croatia	71.894	113.060	36%
Italy	132.125	194.260	32%
Austria	7.091	10.220	31%
Romania	3.684	5.270	30%
Belgium	6.074	8.570	29%
Spain	27.348	33.580	19%
Germany	14.027	15.160	7%
France	3.586	3.667	2%
Greece	24.690	19.920	-24%

Source: Our processing by ReportLinker

The analysis in Table 1 highlights the profound divergence in the demographic dynamics of companies in Europe between 2015 and 2023. The two most relevant are the exceptional expansion of Portugal, which, with a growth rate of 86% signals a structural transition towards an economic model that is highly attractive to new investments and technology start-ups. This trajectory of accelerated growth is paralleled, albeit more contained, in Eastern economies such as Croatia (+36%) and Romania (+30%), which confirm a trend of convergence and entrepreneurial liveliness typical of markets in a consolidation phase.

In this scenario, Italy shows significant resilience: the 32% increase in the entrepreneurial base denotes a regenerative capacity of the national production fabric higher than that of the main European partners; on the contrary, the immature economies of France and Germany appear almost static, with growth between 2 and 7%, suggesting markets that are now saturated, where high barriers to industrial consolidation limit the entry of new players. The only critical note is growth, which contracted by 24%, highlighting the persistent difficulties in rebuilding a business ecosystem after the systemic crises of the last decade. Table 2 shows the companies' revenues.

Table 2. Revenue

Country	*2015*	*2023*	*Crescita*
Portogallo	322,20	1.630,00	80%
Polonia	553,60	1.550,00	64%
Grecia	596,60	1.240,00	52%
Spagna	1.707,40	3.500,00	51%
Italia	3.320,90	5.290,00	37%
Germania	2.129,50	3.320,00	36%
Francia	5.300,10	7.110,00	25%
Belgio	445,90	489,30	9%
Svezia	258,30	282,20	8%
UK	2.943,70	2.860,00	-3%

Source: Our processing by ReportLinker

The analysis of company revenues over the decade under analysis shows a Europe in which growth in turnover does not seem to undermine the numerical expansion of companies, revealing very diversified dynamics of efficiency and consolidation. Portugal is confirmed as the most dynamic reality on the continent, with revenues increasing by 80%. It has not only increased the number of operators on the market but has also scaled its activities, going from a turnover of 322 million to over 1.6 billion euros. A particularly interesting figure is Greece's, which, despite the drastic reduction in the number of companies observed in the previous table, recorded a 52% increase in revenues. This paradox suggests a profound process of natural selection and consolidation: fewer firms, but decidedly larger, capitalised and productive. A similar trend can be observed in Poland (+64%) and Spain (+51%), where the economic expansion seems to have benefited from strong domestic consumption and increased international competitiveness. Italy and Germany show a solid, almost mirror-image progression, with growth of 37% and 36%, respectively. France, despite being the first economy in terms of total turnover (over 7 billion), shows signs of maturity, with 25% growth, reflecting an industrial structure that is already optimised. At the opposite end of the spectrum are the economies of the North and the United Kingdom. Belgium and Sweden recorded marginal growth, below 10%, signs of highly stable markets, but with little room for further volumetric expansion. The most critical figure concerns the United Kingdom, the only country to close the period in the negative (-3%). This contraction in revenues reflects post-Brexit structural and commercial complexities, which have impacted the ability of UK businesses to maintain 2015 turnover levels.

Table 3 shows the trend in overnight stays.

Table 3. Overnight stays

Year	*Number*
2019	512
2020	272
2021	364
2022	597
2023	719
2024	854

Source: Our own elaboration by Eurostat

The table illustrates the evolution of overnight stays from 2019 to 2024, highlighting the recovery parabola and subsequent exceptional expansion. Following the 2020 vertical collapse, which saw volumes halve from more than 500 units in the initial period due to the pandemic shock, the sector has embarked on a steady recovery. Already in 2022, the curve exceeded pre-crisis levels, settling at 600, and then accelerated further in the following two years. The projection for 2024 shows a peak of about 850 units, a sign that the market has not only healed but also increased its attractiveness by more than 60% compared to 2019 levels. Ultimately, the trend describes a transition from a phase of pure survival to a period of unprecedented structural growth. Figure 1, on the other hand, highlights the countries with the highest number of overnight stays in the period.

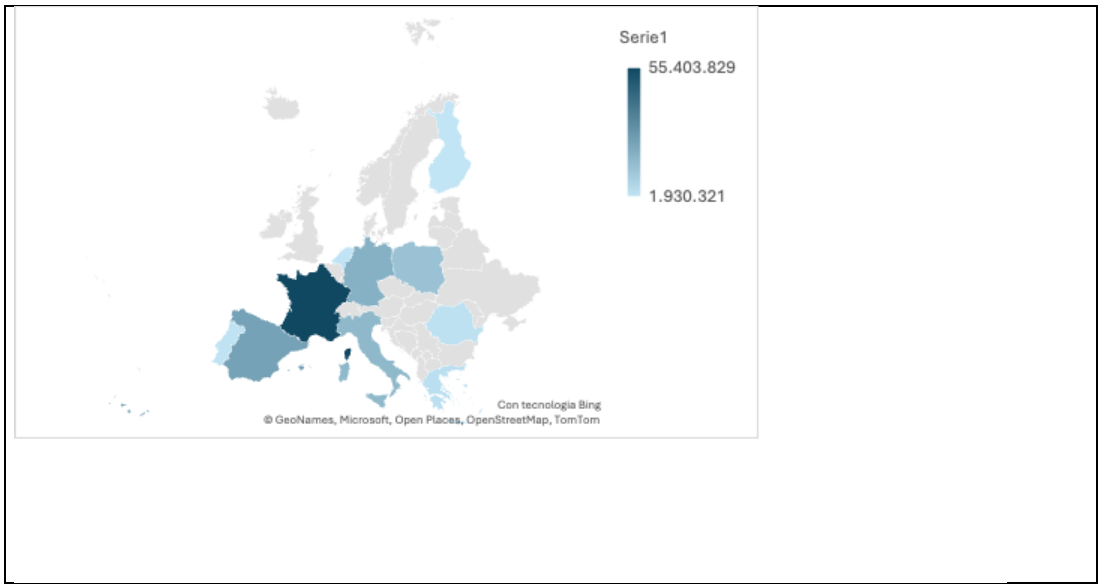

Figure 1. Overnight stays by country - *Source:* Our own elaboration from Eurostat

The map shows a sector that, after the sharp decline of 2020, has experienced a vigorous restart. Analysing the distribution by country based on the colour scale obtained, a hierarchy clearly emerges, linked to the accommodation capacity of the different markets, which can be grouped into three categories: market leaders, intermediate-range markets, and minor markets.

As for the market leaders, the countries represented by the darkest shade reach the maximum threshold of 55.4 million overnight stays. These numbers typically belong to European tourism giants, such as France, Spain, and Italy.

The intermediate range, on the other hand, includes countries with a blue colour, which manage consistent but smaller flows, averaging between 20 and 30 million stays. In this group are countries such as Germany and Poland, which, despite high corporate revenues, have a

slightly less marked dependence on tourism than their Mediterranean neighbours.

Finally, the third group includes smaller markets, whose lighter shades indicate countries approaching the lower limit of 2 million overnight stays. These are merchants of small or developing markets, such as Belgium or Croatia, the latter, however, characterised by very rapid entrepreneurial growth that could be reflected in higher numbers in this sector as well.

Table 4 shows cities by number of overnight stays.

Table 4. Cities by number of overnight stays

	City	*Totale*
1	Paris	288.949.666
2	Rome	124.673.182
3	Berlin	112.003.239
4	Barcelona	95.941.611
5	Madrid	89.921.667
6	Amsterdam	72.877.256
7	Munich	69.238.710
8	Lisbon	68.636.280
9	Hamburg	60.984.613
10	Milan	59.787.718

Source: Our own elaboration by Eurostat

The table concerning cities completes the European picture. Shifting the focus from the national data to that of the large urban agglomerations, which act as real catalysts for the overnight stay booms analysed above. Paris confirms its status as the undisputed capital of the sector, clearly distancing itself from other metropolises with almost 300 million overnight stays. It is the beating heart of that French market, which is first in total revenues. Here, the density of business and tourism creates a volume of business unmatched on the continent. Immediately after, there is the blockade of the large historic and business cities: Rome, Berlin, Barcelona, and Madrid, with the Italian capital exceeding 120 million visitors. In the central and final part of the ranking, cities such as Amsterdam, Munich, Lisbon, Hamburg, and Milan stand between 60 and 90 million overnight stays. The urban hierarchy, therefore, perfectly reflects the strength of corporate revenues: where overnight stays are massive, the local economy not only recovers but generates volumes of turnover that feed the birth of new entrepreneurial realities.

5. RESULTS AND INITIAL EVALUATIONS

5.1. ANALYSIS OF THE LEGAL SITUATION AND SIZE

The rise of short-stay facilities has transformed the face of European tourism, transforming a traditional hospitality model into a high-tech economic model. This evolution has attracted a wide range of operators, necessitating granular analysis of accounting data. Focusing on NACE Rev. 2 55 and subcategory 55.20, a sample of 29,167 facilities in France (10,137), Italy (11,722), and the United Kingdom (7,308) operating in the period 2015-2024 was selected, with at least one useful data point available. A preliminary focus on the legal structure of these realities is represented in Table 5.

Table 5. Legal structure

	France	*Italy*	*UK*	*Total*	*%*
Sole proprietorships	7.123	7.671		14.794	50,73
SRL	2.773	3.038	6.864	12.675	43,45
Other	241	1.013	444	1.698	5,82
Total	*10.137*	*11.722*	*7.308*	*29.167*	100

Source: Our own elaboration

The composition of the legal structure highlights the clear divergence between the continental and Anglo-Saxon economic models. The market is divided between sole proprietorships (50.73%) and limited liability companies (43.45%), with the other forms playing a marginal role. Italy and France are confirmed as the homelands of micro-entrepreneurship, with over 14,000 sole proprietorships in total. This capillary, flexible structure has supported the growth in the number of companies and the revenues shown above, fueling the real economy of large cities. On the contrary, the United Kingdom is betting everything on LLCs (6,864 units), doubling the values of its European partners but showing greater structural rigidity.

Table 6 highlights the trend of investments in the three countries.

Table 6. Investment analysis (Mil Eur)

	2015	*2016*	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*
France	2.334,62	1.967,33	2.402,70	2.479,43	3.429,19	3.690,12	4.414,28	5.454,00	5.699,93	4.565,65
Italy	4.306,19	4.578,18	4.876,22	5.181,91	5.720,09	6.800,09	7.549,07	7.984,32	8.338,60	6.070,57
UK	4.269,60	4.605,29	5.730,25	6.373,35	7.398,76	7.988,29	10.753,13	11.950,72	12.380,03	3.756,29

Source: Our own elaboration

The trend in investments over the last decade perfectly reflects Europe's different speeds, with Italy standing out for its constant, solid growth. Starting from 4.3 billion in 2015, Italy has almost doubled its capital investment, reaching a peak of 8.3 billion in 2023. The trend is consistent with the increase in company revenues, a sign that the system has continued to bet on itself. The United Kingdom, on the other hand, after years of absolute dominance with record investments of over 12 billion, suffers a collapse in 2024, plummeting to 3.7 billion. This collapse, combined with the decline in revenues, is evident in a post-Brexit structural crisis of confidence. Finally, France follows a middle ground, with significant growth until 2023, and then reflected in 2024 at 4.5 billion, while still maintaining volumes above the starting point. 2024, in short, is a sharp slowdown for everyone, but Italy arrives at this stage with much more robust foundations and accumulated and more regulated growth than its partners.

Table 7 analyses the evolution of the number of employees.

Table 7. Employees

	2015	*2016*	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*
France	6.423	5.356	7.459	5.762	13.049	12.319	11.878	5.758	6.499	7.020
Italy	9.419	10.781	12.247	14.451	15.111	23.765	26.337	29.432	33.708	14.567
UK	10.485	14.345	17.747	35.300	21.046	22.004	24.966	28.752	31.387	11.764

Source: our own elaboration

The analysis of employees completes the economic picture, showing that Italy has experienced an extraordinary employment expansion, resulting in 33,700 employees in 2023. This figure is consistent with the growth in the number of investment companies in the country, as Italy has not only created new companies but also generated 1 EBITDA of jobs, which is almost obligatory compared to 2015. The United Kingdom presents a more erratic trend; in fact, after an anomalous peak in 2018 (35,300 units) and a subsequent rise to 31,387 employees in 2023, it suffers a drastic collapse in 2024, falling to 11,764. This sharp reduction faithfully follows the collapse of investments and the decline in revenues, confirming a systemic crisis that now directly affects employment. France, on the other hand, maintains a much more streamlined, stable structure. Despite being the country with the highest revenues, the number of employees fluctuates moderately, ending 2024 at 7,020 units, suggesting a production model

with very high added value and automation, in which a few large companies generate wealth with a limited number of employees.

Finally, Table 8 shows the turnover of the three countries.

Table 8. Turnover (Mil Eur)

	2015	*2016*	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*
France	1.782	1.825	1.829	2.041	3.505	2.309	2.998	4.473	4.187	3.774
Italy	1.407	1.618	1.802	1.956	2.066	3.432	4.025	5.048	5.714	3.006
UK	939	971	1.113	1.127	1.302	997	1.555	1.853	1.944	536

Source: Our own elaboration

The trend in turnover closes the circle of the analysis, highlighting how the ability to generate revenues has been closely linked to the expansion of employees and investments, although it has slowed down sharply in the last year. Italy showed the group's most impressive and steady growth, doubling its turnover from 1,407 million in 2015 to a peak of 5,714 million in 2023. This leap reflects the exceptional dynamism of Italian companies, which, as seen in the previous tables, have been able to transform the average number of overnight stays of the workforce into real monetary value. However, 2024 marks a halving of turnover, a figure that follows due to the investments and employees recorded in the same year. France initially moved on volumes higher than Italy's, maintaining a solid growth trend that peaked in 2022 at 4,473 million. France shows greater resilience in 2024, although falling to 3,774 million, the decrease is much less violent, confirming the stability of that model based on large structured companies. Finally, the United Kingdom confirms its extreme fragility, closing 2024 with a turnover of 536 million, the lowest of the entire decade. This figure is the result of a systemic crisis, which has seen British companies pulverise their ability to generate turnover, returning to levels well below those of 2015. In conclusion, the decade shows us an Italy capable of an unprecedented economic climb until 2023, an extremely resilient France and a United Kingdom that closes the period with a very deep turnover recession.

5.2. ECONOMETRIC ANALYSIS

5.2.1. CLUSTER ANALYSIS

Cluster analysis is an exploratory statistical technique useful for identifying and describing homogeneous groupings of data based on observed variables, regardless of a priori hypotheses (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 2009). Within the methodological landscape, hierarchical methods, characterised by a representation of proximity, and partitioned methods, such as the K-Means algorithm (MacQueen, 1967), are the main distinctions. The latter works by iteratively minimising intragroup variance to split the sample into k predefined clusters. In business economics, this technique is critical for mapping organisational diversity, isolating subgroups with similar monthly, structural, or performance profiles (Ketchen & Shook, 1996). As highlighted by Hair (2019), however, the effectiveness of the analysis depends strictly on the choices regarding variable selection and the number of clusters. Although the literature has already explored clustering in tourism, from the DEA models for accommodation (2020) and financial profiles in S.p.A. (2025), the specific applications to the European short-stay sector remain limited. The integration of dimensional drivers and performance indices is, therefore, a promising research area for decoding business models in a rapidly changing sector.

To decipher the complexity of the sample, the K-Means method was adopted, a machine Learning technique that groups companies based on objective data. Focusing on the three-dimensional parameters, three distinct company profiles were identified. This breakdown is only a statistical choice, but an analytical necessity, as it allows us to compare realities operating

under similar economic and financial logics, thereby avoiding the distortion of results caused by the different dimensional rules of the tourism sector. Table 9 highlights the three clusters.

Table 9. Cluster size

	France	*Italy*	*United Kingdom*	*Total*
Cluster 1	10.129	11.719	7.296	*29.144*
Cluster 2	7	3	11	*21*
Cluster 3	1		1	*2*

Source: Our own elaboration

Given the extremely small number of the third group, Cluster 3 is interpreted primarily as a dimensional outlier and used for descriptive rather than inferential purposes.

The analysis of the company's distribution shows a highly polarised sample. Cluster 1 dominates, comprising almost all observations, with Italy as the main country, followed by France and the United Kingdom. Clusters 2 and 3 have an extremely small number compared to the main cluster. Cluster 2 identifies a small group of medium-sized firms, while Cluster 3 represents an isolated case in the dataset. For this reason, it must be interpreted primarily as a dimensional outlier, useful as a comparative reference but not fully representative of the sector's structure. In summary, the clustering criteria separated the critical, homogeneous mass of firms in Cluster 1 from the few niche or outlier cases in Clusters 2 and 3. Figure 2 analyses the three clusters.

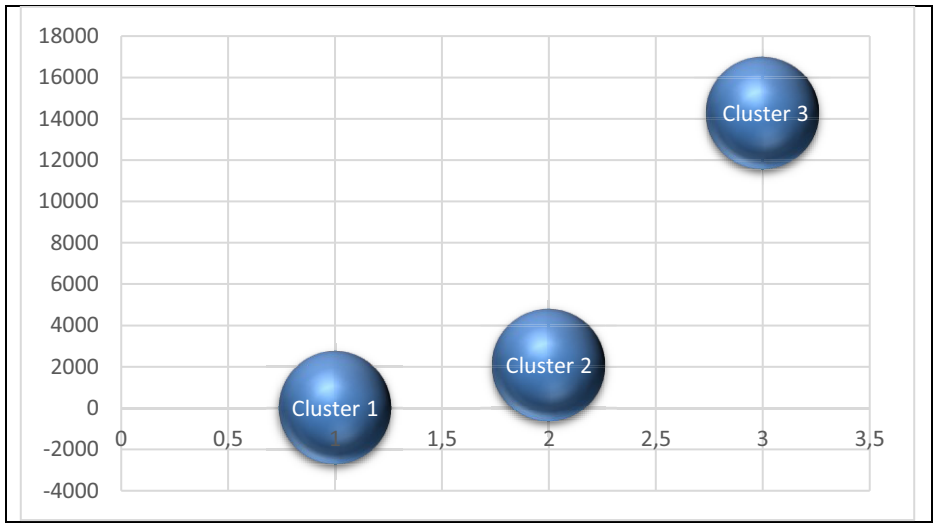

Figure 2. Cluster Analysis – *Source*: Our own elaboration

The 3D scatter plot offers a plastic snapshot of the structure of the market: A large base of small companies (Cluster 1) squeezed towards the origin of the axes, a selected group of medium-sized companies (Cluster 2) that begin to scale the three dimensions of analysis and, a single vertex (Cluster 3) that represents the extreme case (dimensional outlier) of the dataset. The clear spatial separation between these groups shows that the chosen variables are fundamental discriminants for understanding the industrial hierarchy of the sector. The point relating to Cluster 3 appears isolated from the distribution of the other observations and identifies a dimensional outlier in the dataset. Its presence highlights the strong asymmetry of the sector's structure, dominated by micro-enterprises and characterised by only a few very large operators.

5.2.2. ROA

Return on Assets (ROA) is an index that measures how well a company uses its assets to generate net profit. It is calculated using the formula: Net Profit/Total Assets * 100. Examining ROA across clusters enables an evaluation of operational efficiency in resource utilisation, regardless of businesses' financial positions. This indicator is used to compare efficiency across different groups, identify productive sectors, and improve resource management.

Table 10 highlights the descriptive statistics of ROA.

Table 10. ROA - Descriptive Statistics

Cluster 1	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*
Average	2,48548674	3,21026057	3,15206993	2,79505349	2,97534315	-4,5906231	4,77984424	6,71897614	8,21091029	9,34408511
Standard error	0,3480903	0,31773603	0,33628122	0,31089629	0,31014772	0,35134355	0,31458738	0,29736845	0,31386889	0,383103
Median	1,134	1,3515	1,418	1,386	1,398	-0,867	2,039	3,39	4,12	4,9185
Mode	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0,842	3,76	8,694
Standard deviation	17,6258852	16,6440311	18,4280881	17,5263905	17,97787	20,7054361	19,0474803	18,2633622	19,4927493	18,5716071
Sample variance	310,671829	277,023773	339,59443	307,174365	323,20381	428,715085	362,806506	333,550399	379,967276	344,904591
Curtosis	7,96592777	7,39913119	7,79526204	7,28155786	8,22039106	5,06427903	6,42555296	5,48895876	4,8389974	5,05886555
Asymmetry	-0,062776	0,24812521	-0,2490896	-0,2303746	0,15777228	-0,6226538	0,18247247	0,05707666	0,16525259	0,71372782
Range	198,58	198,869	195,053	197,249	198,57	200	200	197,878	200	194,436
Minimum	-98,61	-98,876	-99,308	-97,34	-98,57	-100	-100	-97,972	-100	-94,436
Maximum	99,97	99,993	95,745	99,909	100	100	100	99,906	100	100
Sum	6372,788	8808,955	9465,666	8882,68	9997,153	-15943,234	17522,909	25343,978	31669,481	21958,6
Counting	2564	2744	3003	3178	3360	3473	3666	3772	3857	2350
Cluster 2	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*
Average	9,59526667	7,2812	7,81311765	7,3976	2,14653333	-4,9557333	-1,905375	3,23117647	1,303	0,08863636
Standard error	6,58650306	5,40521264	5,86818867	6,60121276	1,29931042	2,51681468	3,71527445	1,25142004	1,28020721	1,68371476
Median	2,056	1,557	2,133	0,79	2,74	-3,202	-1,406	2,735	1,0745	1,06
Mode	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D
Standard deviation	25,5094167	20,9342985	24,1951617	25,5663871	5,03220762	9,74758136	14,8610978	5,15973701	5,12082885	5,58425011
Sample variance	650,730338	438,244855	585,405851	653,640148	25,3231136	95,0153424	220,852228	26,622886	26,2228881	31,1838493
Curtosis	11,5322276	13,2360951	15,3535635	13,9140104	-0,2164533	-0,3831073	7,20494519	0,52746029	-0,556629	4,97180206
Asymmetry	3,29696814	3,55464855	3,83415975	3,66759139	-0,3437504	-0,3389491	-2,322346	0,3075768	0,24174488	-1,5085074
Range	102,915	86,75	108,446	108,948	18,046	33,842	63,972	20,705	17,375	23,364
Minimum	-5,797	-5,673	-8,707	-10,539	-7,815	-22,412	-49,62	-6,86	-6,979	-14,186
Maximum	97,118	81,077	99,739	98,409	10,231	11,43	14,352	13,845	10,396	9,178
Sum	143,929	109,218	132,823	110,964	32,198	-74,336	-30,486	54,93	20,848	0,975
Counting	15	15	17	15	15	15	16	17	16	11
Cluster 3	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*
Average	8,709	7,729	4,4	4,355	2,683	2,806	5,724	3,857	7,043	#DIV/0!
Standard error	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Median	8,709	7,729	4,4	4,355	2,683	2,806	5,724	3,857	7,043	#NUM!

Mode	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#VALORE!
Standard deviation	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!
Sample variance	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!
Curtosis	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!
Asymmetry	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!
Range	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Minimum	8,709	7,729	4,4	4,355	2,683	2,806	5,724	3,857	7,043	0
Maximum	8,709	7,729	4,4	4,355	2,683	2,806	5,724	3,857	7,043	0
Sum	8,709	7,729	4,4	4,355	2,683	2,806	5,724	3,857	7,043	0
Counting	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0

Source: Our own elaboration

The examination of annual data across the three clusters reveals marked heterogeneity in inferential robustness. Cluster 1 is the pillar of the analysis; the number of observations, in fact, guarantees high statistical significance of the tests, allowing the recovery of averages in the post-pandemic period to be accurately traced. Cluster 2, on the other hand, shows strong volatility deriving from the limited sample base, making the observed trends difficult to generalise despite the formal correctness of the processing. Finally, cluster 3 lacks independent statistical significance, as the presence of only 1 or 2 cases per year precludes the reliability of complex dispersion measurements. The trend of the mean ratio is represented graphically by identifying the best interpolation equation that maximises R^2 (Table 11).

Table 11. ROA - Interpolating equations

Cluster	*Equation*	R^2
Cluster 1	$y = 0{,}0046x^6 - 0{,}1595x^5 + 2{,}1072x^4 - 13{,}365x^3 + 41{,}675x^2 - 58{,}694x + 31{,}083$	0,7511
Cluster 2	$y = 0{,}0063x^6 - 0{,}2235x^5 + 3{,}0414x^4 - 19{,}988x^3 + 64{,}972x^2 - 97{,}083x + 58{,}559$	0,9269
Cluster 3	$y = 0{,}006x6 - 0{,}2322x5 + 3{,}3859x4 - 23{,}399x3 + 78{,}729x2 - 120{,}65x + 71{,}441$	0,6814

Source: Our own elaboration

The graphs in Figure 3 illustrate the trend of ROA over the ten years analysed, comparing the dotted line with the corresponding polynomial interpolation curve.

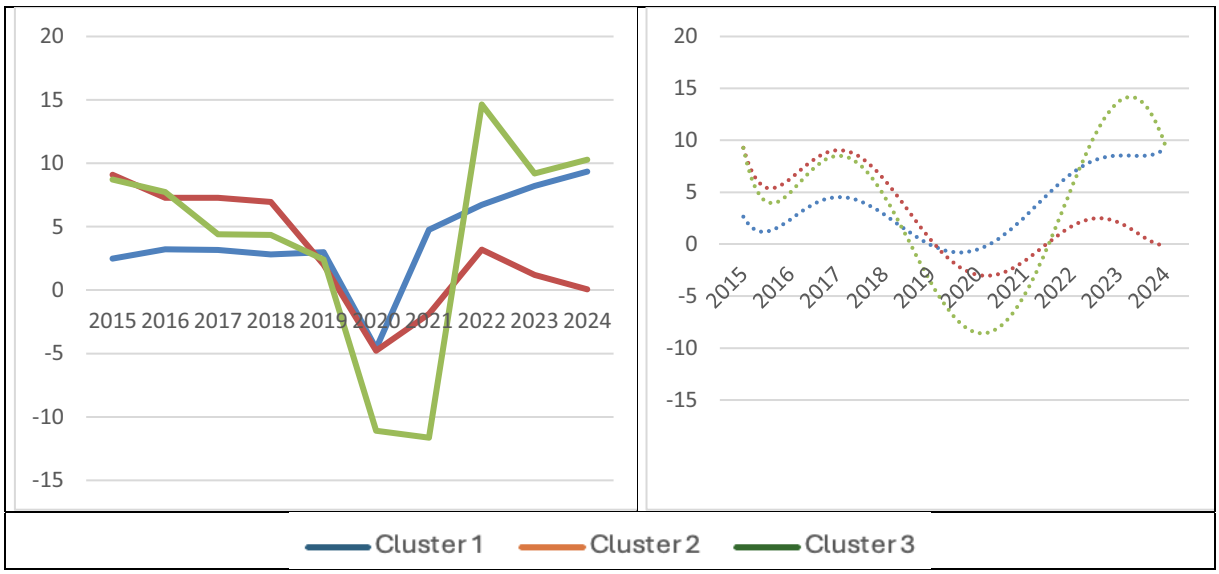

Figure 3. ROA - Split and Interpolating Curve – *Source*: Our Own Processing

ROA analysis shows very different behaviour between clusters. Cluster 1 stands out for its stability and resilience, with a slight decline in 2020 followed by a solid and steady recovery, making it the group with the most reliable profitability. Cluster 2 appears fragile, suffering a sharp decline during the crisis and a subsequent continuous contraction towards values close to zero. Cluster 3 does not allow for true statistical analysis because it comprises an extremely limited number of observations. The observed values must therefore be interpreted as indications of an extreme case rather than as the average behaviour of a group of firms. Analysis of variance excludes statistically significant differences (Table 12).

Table 12. ROA - ANOVA

Summary						
Groups	*Counting*	*Sum*	*Average*	*Variance*		
Cluster 1	10	39,0974756	3,90974756	14,911438		
Cluster 2	10	30,4331281	3,04331281	20,7156527		
Cluster 3	10	38,987	3,8987	76,7652206		
Analysis of variance						
Origin of the variation	*SQ*	*dof*	*MQ*	*F*	*Significance value*	*F crit*
Between groups	4,94172825	2	2,47086412	0,06595284	0,93632535	3,35413083
In groups	1011,5308	27	37,4641038			
Total	1016,47253	29				

Source: our own elaboration

Comparing F with the critical value F shows that the hypothesis H0 is accepted, since the value of F is less.

5.2.3. LEVERAGE

Financial Leverage measures the effect of debt on return on equity, indicating how much debt capital amplifies shareholders' returns. The formula is: Total Assets/Equity. Applied to business clusters, it enables assessing the average level of debt and its impact on profitability.

Cluster-level analysis allows us to understand how much companies use debt capital relative to their own capital, highlighting different financial strategies, the groups most exposed to risk, and those that use debt efficiently to support investments and returns. Table 13 shows the descriptive statistics of Leverage.

Table 13. Leverage: Descriptive Statistics

Cluster 1	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*
Average	106,611746	109,125394	112,959814	113,433155	112,021814	124,322976	115,298978	107,853678	101,362573	96,4109797
Standard error	3,4540331	3,40298605	3,29243661	3,21546201	2,9125351	3,08200962	2,71244558	2,43880071	2,28718122	2,85074734
Median	22,996	22,2365	21,89	22,424	22,92	33,679	28,4415	24,476	22,126	18,6065
Mode	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Standard deviation	182,541646	189,225609	194,28166	196,353919	187,378122	200,140873	194,767948	186,356931	178,458771	172,08694
Sample variance	33321,4526	35806,331	37745,3634	38554,8617	35110,5604	40056,3692	37934,5535	34728,9059	31847,5331	29613,9148
Curtosis	5,85951697	6,03911698	5,21600994	5,4389158	4,99857963	4,69649584	5,59772686	6,08882513	6,88774464	7,25376551
Asymmetry	2,40846918	2,45332428	2,34494964	2,3767242	2,26949824	2,23255254	2,39614235	2,47417317	2,58588215	2,62258486
Range	992,951	996,635	999,623	999,198	997,71	997,656	999,322	997,964	998,461	996,791
Minimum	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Maximum	992,951	996,635	999,623	999,198	997,71	997,656	999,322	997,964	998,461	996,791
Sum	297766,607	337415,718	393326,071	422992,236	463658,287	524269,991	594481,533	629757,623	617095,345	351321,61
Counting	2793	3092	3482	3729	4139	4217	5156	5839	6088	3644
Cluster 2	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*
Average	109,036	143,758615	140,480688	136,451143	118,318385	116,685714	142,413636	216,548267	173,218067	141,129
Standard error	40,8610726	60,5820675	44,2154752	46,2205723	47,5915288	44,143613	52,565925	64,7544582	62,7165091	73,9686328
Median	67,921	78	68,5495	62,483	50,445	52,658	41,132	77,289	44,982	41,252
Mode	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D
Standard deviation	141,546908	218,431751	176,861901	172,941546	171,593697	165,170276	174,34145	250,792938	242,899995	233,909355
Sample variance	20035,527	47712,4298	31280,1319	29908,7782	29444,397	27281,22	30394,9412	62897,0978	59000,4077	54713,5864
Curtosis	3,30244715	6,36927547	2,36481052	0,86918685	4,16736772	8,0156483	-0,2501904	0,8100319	4,56031903	6,850277
Asymmetry	1,99251955	2,49153228	1,72829451	1,46503407	2,17228946	2,68353197	1,18092505	1,27320985	2,10880781	2,56277732
Range	463,724	779,799	599,007	511,903	577,226	632,846	482,053	816,714	878,236	764,151
Minimum	0	0	0	0	0,784	0	1,528	1,434	1,511	1,344
Maximum	463,724	779,799	599,007	511,903	578,01	632,846	483,581	818,148	879,747	765,495
Sum	1308,432	1868,862	2247,691	1910,316	1538,139	1633,6	1566,55	3248,224	2598,271	1411,29
Counting	12	13	16	14	13	14	11	15	15	10
Cluster 3	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*	*2023*	*2024*
Average	18,091	12,327	99,806	90,443	94,15	100,013	76,398	101,933	121,3	#DIV/0!
Standard error	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Median	18,091	12,327	99,806	90,443	94,15	100,013	76,398	101,933	121,3	#NUM!
Mode	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#N/D	#VALORE!
Standard deviation	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!
Sample variance	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!
Curtosis	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!
Asymmetry	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!
Range	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Minimum	18,091	12,327	99,806	90,443	94,15	100,013	76,398	101,933	121,3	0
Maximum	18,091	12,327	99,806	90,443	94,15	100,013	76,398	101,933	121,3	0
Sum	18,091	12,327	99,806	90,443	94,15	100,013	76,398	101,933	121,3	0
Counting	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0

Source: our own elaboration

The Financial Leverage analysis shows marked differences in debt levels across the clusters. Cluster 1 shows prudent and stable management, with moderate Leverage and a slight increase in 2020 to deal with the crisis, confirming the financial solidity and reliability of the data. Cluster 2 has a more aggressive profile, with a higher average Leverage and a peak in debt in 2020, a sign of greater financial risk, albeit on a smaller sample. Finally, Cluster 3 is statistically unreliable due to the scarcity of observations, which prevents reliable assessments of its funding structure. Table 14 shows the trend of the mean ratios, which identify the best interpolation equation that maximises R^2.

Table 14. Leverage - Interpolating equations and R2

Cluster	*Equation*	R^2
Cluster 1	$y = -0{,}0011x^6 + 0{,}055x^5 - 0{,}9325x^4 + 7{,}1284x^3 - 26{,}02x^2 + 44{,}701x + 81{,}366$	0,8803
Cluster 2	$y = 0{,}0436x^6 - 1{,}4486x^5 + 18{,}182x^4 - 106{,}94x^3 + 296{,}82x^2 - 339{,}76x + 236{,}52$	0,8735
Cluster 3	$y = 0{,}1663x^6 - 5{,}0543x^5 + 60{,}641x^4 - 362{,}5x^3 + 1110{,}5x^2 - 1565{,}7x + 780{,}81$	0,9937

Source: our own elaboration

The graphs in Figure 4 illustrate the trend of Financial Leverage in the years analysed.

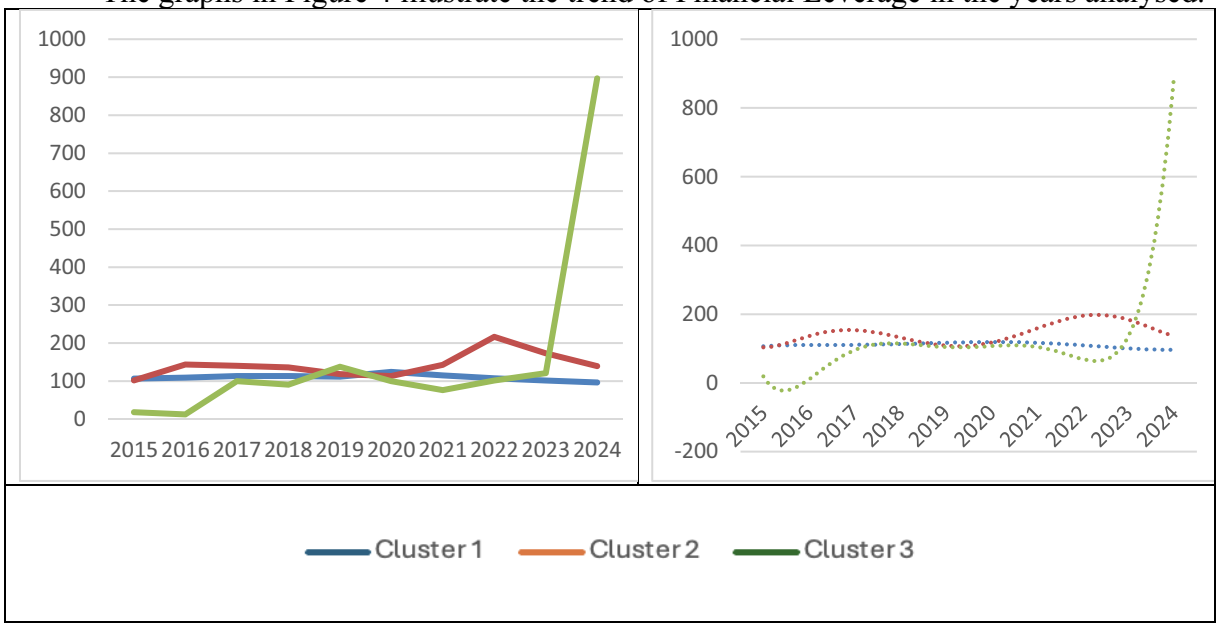

Figure 4. Leverage - Broken and interpolated curve. *Source*: Our own elaboration

The visual analysis of Financial Leverage highlights a strong polarisation in debt strategies. Cluster 1 maintains a prudent and stable profile, with low values indicative of a limited risk appetite. Cluster 2 shows higher, more volatile Leverage, with a cyclical trend that reflects less conservative financial management. Also, in the case of Leverage, Cluster 3 represents an isolated case in the dataset, which does not allow generalisable statistical inferences but does highlight the existence of operators much larger than the industry average. The analysis of variance, also in this case, excludes statistically significant differences (Table 15).

Table 15. Leverage - ANOVA

Summary						
Groups	*Counting*	*Sum*	*Average*	*Variance*		
Cluster 1	10	1099,22192	109,922192	59,2280675		
Cluster 2	10	1425,58135	142,558135	1063,38256		
Cluster 3	10	1654,5925	165,45925	67673,4858		
Analysis of Variance						
Origin of the variation	*SQ*	*dof*	*MQ*	*F*	*Significance value*	*F crit*
Between groups	15579,7691	2	7789,88454	0,33969447	0,71498691	3,35413083
In groups	619164,868	27	22932,0321			
Total	634744,637	29				

Source: Our own elaboration

Comparing F with the critical value F shows that the hypothesis H0 is accepted, since the value of F is smaller.

5.2.4. POST ANOVA

The ANOVA test of the two indices indicates that there are no statistically significant differences among the three clusters. The post-ANOVA test confirms the conclusions outlined above (Table 16).

Table 3. Post ANOVA

POST ANOVA	*ROA*	*LEVA*
Media Cluster 1	3,909747564	109,9221916
Cluster Group No. 1	10	10
Media Cluster 2	3,04331281	142,558135
Cluster Group No. 2	10	10
Media Cluster 3	3,8987	165,45925
Cluster Group No. 3	10	10
MQ	37,46410378	22932,03213
Q Statistic	3,514	3,514
Cluster 1 - Cluster 2 Comparison		
Absolute difference	0,87	-32,64
Standard error	1,935564615	47,8874014
Critical Value	6,801574056	168,2763285
Average Group	*No different*	*No different*
Cluster 1 - Cluster 3 Comparison		
Absolute difference	0,01	-55,54
Standard error	1,935564615	47,8874014
Critical Value	6,801574056	168,2763285
Average Group	*No different*	*No different*
Cluster 2 - Cluster 3 Comparison		
Absolute difference	-0,86	-22,90
Standard error	1,935564615	47,8874014
Critical Value	6,801574056	168,2763285
Average Group	*No different*	*No different*

Source: our own elaboration

The post-ANOVA analysis shows that, despite the apparent differences in the averages of the three clusters for the two financial metrics (ROA, LEVA), most of these differences are not statistically significant.

Comparisons between Clusters do not allow us to reject the null hypothesis, indicating that the variations are due to sample variability rather than real structural differences. The analysis validates a hypothesis of functional homogeneity: despite the profound size disparities highlighted in the *cluster analysis*, business models seem to converge towards average profitability performance and similar financing structures. This implies that size variables act as discriminants of the operating scale, but not as determinants of performance quality or relative financial stability.

6. HYPOTHESIS TESTING AND DISCUSSION

Empirical tests were conducted by comparing the annual averages of economic-financial indicators across the K-means clusters, using ANOVA and subsequent post hoc comparisons.

The empirical results allow verification of the hypotheses formulated in the theoretical section and interpretation of the economic and financial dynamics of companies operating in the European short-term rentals sector.

***H1**. In the STR sector, operational efficiency, as measured by ROA, is not affected by company size.*

The analysis of variance of the mean ROA values across the three clusters does not show statistically significant differences between the groups. The ANOVA test, therefore, does not allow rejection of the null hypothesis of equal averages, suggesting that asset utilisation

efficiency is substantially homogeneous across companies of different sizes. This result appears consistent with a part of the literature on short-term rentals that highlights how the competitiveness of operators depends less on company size and more on the ability to use digital tools, manage online reputation, and dynamically adapt prices to demand (Guttentag, 2015; Mody et al., 2021). Unlike the traditional hotel industry, where size often confers a competitive advantage through economies of scale (Brown & Dev, 1999; Singh & Schmidgall, 2013), in the STR sector, even small operators can achieve comparable levels of efficiency through digital platforms.

H2. *Leverage levels differ across firms in different-sized clusters.*

The descriptive analysis shows some differences in average Leverage levels across the clusters, but the ANOVA test again does not show statistically significant differences. Therefore, the H2 hypothesis is not confirmed by the data analysed. This result suggests that the financing strategies of companies operating in the short-term rentals sector do not follow rigid schemes associated with company size, but rather reflect heterogeneous management choices. The economic-financial literature highlights how the use of debt capital can amplify the vulnerability of tourism companies to demand shocks (Sohn et al., 2013). However, in the case of STRs, the spread of relatively light organisational models from a capital perspective tends to mitigate the financial differences between operators.

H3*. Size clusters show different trajectories of operational efficiency (ROA) in the post-pandemic shock period.*

The ROA time series analysis shows that the 2020 pandemic shock led to a generalised contraction in operating profitability across all clusters. In the following years, however, a progressive recovery phase was observed, particularly evident in the dominant cluster composed of micro and small enterprises. Although this dynamic is not the subject of a specific statistical test, the time trajectories suggest that the clusters exhibit different recovery patterns. This evidence is consistent with the literature on tourism resilience, which indicates that companies characterised by greater organisational flexibility and less structural rigidity can adapt more quickly to changes in demand (Brouder, 2020; Hall et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020). In the context of short-term rentals, the ability to quickly reconfigure the offer and modulate operating costs is, in fact, a crucial element of adaptation in times of crisis.

The analysis of the time series, therefore, suggests distinct recovery trajectories across clusters during the post-pandemic shock period. However, this evidence is mainly descriptive, as the present study does not apply specific statistical tests to the recovery process. Therefore, the H3 hypothesis is partially supported at the descriptive level and requires further empirical verification using more structured longitudinal models. Rather than size, the performance of operators seems to depend on management and operational factors that are difficult to observe in balance sheet data, such as demand management capacity, digital reputation and strategic use of intermediation platforms (Dolnicar, 2019; Mody et al., 2021).

These results confirm the specificity of the STR sector within the traditional hotel industry and suggest the need to better integrate economic-financial analysis with operational and digital indicators to understand the determinants of performance in contemporary hospitality platforms.

7. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

This study provided a comparative economic and financial assessment of the European short-stay accommodation sector by analysing the financial statements of 29,167 companies in France, Italy, and the United Kingdom for the period 2015–2024.

This study contributes to the literature on short-term rentals by providing one of the first large-scale financial analyses of STR firms based on accounting data rather than platform-scraped data.

The use of cluster analysis has highlighted a highly polarised market structure, dominated by a large group of micro-enterprises (Cluster 1) flanked by a very limited number of larger operators.

The main contribution of the study is to show that, in the short-term rentals sector, company size is not a determining factor of operating performance. In fact, empirical analysis does not detect statistically significant differences in average ROA levels across the identified clusters. This result differs from traditional evidence in the hotel sector, where size is often associated with competitive advantages deriving from economies of scale. In the STR market, on the other hand, the spread of digital platforms and the flexibility of organisational models allow even small operators to achieve levels of efficiency comparable to those of more structured companies.

Similarly, the leverage analysis shows descriptive differences between clusters, but these divergences are not statistically significant. This suggests that the financing strategies of companies in the sector do not follow rigid schemes linked to company size, but rather reflect heterogeneous, adaptive management choices. In a context characterised by strong volatility in tourism demand, operational flexibility therefore seems to play a more important role than financial configuration in determining companies' resilience.

Overall, the results confirm the structural specificity of the short-term rental sector compared to the traditional hotel industry. In fact, companies operate in a competitive environment mediated by digital platforms, in which the ability to adapt organizationally, manage online reputation and make effective use of digital tools can compensate for any dimensional disadvantages. In this sense, the cluster analysis highlights the sector's heterogeneity but also suggests a degree of convergence in economic-financial models among operators of different sizes.

From a managerial and policy perspective, these results indicate that the competitive strengthening of STR companies does not necessarily depend on dimensional growth processes, but rather on the ability to develop flexible management models and digital skills. In a sector characterised by strong fragmentation and rapid technological evolution, support policies aimed at professionalising operators and disseminating digital tools can help improve the sector's overall resilience.

However, the study has some limitations. The analysis is based solely on balance sheet data and does not include typical hospitality industry operating indicators, such as Average Daily Rate (ADR), Occupancy Rate, or Revenue per Available Room (RevPAR). In addition, dimensional clustering does not allow us to capture some potentially relevant qualitative variables, such as the level of professionalisation of hosts, digital reputation or the adoption of technological tools for facility management.

Future research could therefore integrate economic and financial analysis with operational indicators and data from digital platforms to better understand the determinants of performance in the short-term rentals sector. In particular, the application of *Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA)* models could enable a deeper evaluation of companies' operational efficiency,

especially within the dominant micro-operator cluster. Further research could also analyse the impact of recent regulatory developments and transformations in the European tourism market on the sector's competitive structure.

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THE POTENTIAL OF HUMAN RESOURCES IN THE HORECA SECTOR FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM /THE CASE OF BULGARIA/

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the potential of human factor achieving sustainable tourism. To achieve this goal, data from the national statistics of the Republic of Bulgaria in hotels, restaurants and catering (HORECA) sector and based on the certain conclusions and recommendations for measures for the inclusion of the human factor have been formulated. The data shows that the HORECA sector employs a substantial share of the tourism workforce, reflecting its significant economic and social importance. In terms of GDP contribution, the sector demonstrated stable growth and strong post-pandemic recovery. In terms of employment in the sector, it was found that the contribution to GDP is increasing, although the number of employees in the sector in 2024 decreases compared to 2019. Through cross-data analyses, it was found that the HORECA sector demonstrates significant progress in increasing wages. The analysis is complemented by an analytical model that summarize the key relationships between employment, wages, economic performance, and sustainability. This study raises the topic of adapting education and professional skills, which are the basis for planning, recruiting, and developing human resources to achieve long-term tourism development and increase its sustainability. An even more important emphasis is the introduction of solutions and good practices for successful and sustainable jobs, for which tourism has great potential.*

KEYWORDS: *human capital, HORECA sector, sustainable employment, tourism development, green jobs*

INTRODUCTION

The Council of the European Union (EU), through the European Tourism Agenda, defines a strategic framework for a sustainable and competitive tourism sector in Europe, prioritizing "the ecological and digital transition, increasing sustainability and emphasizing innovation and improving skills by 2030" (New European agenda for tourism, 2022). This EU policy raises important questions regarding the investments needed to achieve the aforementioned goals and ways to address the negative impact of tourism activities on the environment and climate change. An important prerequisite for addressing negative impacts and achieving competitive and economically stable tourism organizations is coordinated action in several areas, including technological development, human factors and working conditions and the implementation of innovations.

In this study, the human factor is positioned as a central analytical focus and establishes its importance in the formation of economic benefits and potential sustainable measures for the creation of green jobs. To achieve an effective management process and offer working social measures, employees in tourism should be attracted, retained, and provided with sustainable development at all levels - executive, expert, and managerial. At the Conference on European Statistics, work as an activity was presented in three directions: - economic, social, and environmental. In general, it can be said that the workforce influences these three areas, through the formation of income, obtaining appropriate education, determining the standard of living, personal development, and forming views on maintaining environmental practices and policies. To support the interpretation of the empirical results, this study employs a synthetic analytical

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model that links labor-related indicators with economic performance and sustainability considerations in the hotels, restaurants and catering (HORECA) sector.

The aim of this study is to assess the socio-economic impact of the workforce oin tourism and explore ways to achieve sustainable development.

To achieve the goal, the authors set the following tasks:

- Presenting the place of tourism, in particular hotels, restaurants and the catering sector (HORECA), in the formation of Bulgaria's gross domestic product (GDP).
- Comparison of the average salary in the HORECA sector with the average salaries for the country based on data from national statistics.
- Proops solutions for the development of sustainable employment in the country through education and green jobs.

To achieve these goals and tasks, research methods for collecting and synthesizing information, analytical methods, and data analysis have been used.

Achieving sustainable employment in tourism is one of the global challenges facing the industry, mainly in the accommodation, food, and catering sector (HORECA), where many people are usually employed. Tourism provides a wide range of opportunities and is sector of the economy that encompasses the interests of various target groups in practicing tourism activities. The productivity of local tourism destinations is an important factor in the state's economic policy (Gojaeva & Gutium, 2024). The tourism sector can be a tool for promoting economic and social growth by achieving development imperatives, while minimizing negative social, cultural, and environmental impacts (Ivanova, 2024).

Balkan countries are not among the most industrially developed, but due to the abundance of tourism resources, many of them specialize in tourism development as a means of achieving economic progress (Dimanov, 2019). This observation also applies to Bulgaria, where the HORECA sector plays a significant role in economic development and regional stabilization. For Bulgaria, the green transition is not only an environmental challenge, but also an opportunity for economic transformation.

An important advantage of the tourism industry (from a social and economic point of view) is the creation of jobs. It provides employment that can be defined as direct (hotels, catering and entertainment establishments, travel agencies, etc.) and indirect, by providing employment in various economic sectors (construction, food and beverage industry, agriculture, manufacturing, crafts, etc.) (Kusluvan, 2021). Tourism, "which is essentially an aggregation-type sector, creates incentives for the development of related industries." (Stefanov, 2018).

Bulgaria is a country with a population of nearly 6.5 million people (in 2023) and a territory of 110,994 km² and has its own issues to be resolved in the field of tourism. The opportunities for tourism development in its territory are very diverse and they include natural and anthropogenic resources, which have the potential to develop. This is a favorable condition for practicing various types of tourism. In addition to mass tourism, consumers are looking for modern and alternative forms of tourism related to certain trends in society. Tourists often seek a healthy lifestyle in pure nature, food directly from producers without GMOs and artificial fertilizers, outdoor activities, etc. (Varadzhakova, 2018; Penerliev, 2017).

The report is based on the presentation and analysis of key economic and social aspects of the HORECA sector, as well as the role and significance of its workforce. It examines their contribution to Bulgaria's GDP, number of employees, and wages compared to the national average. Opportunities are identified, and recommendations are made for the development of green jobs in the HORECA sector in Bulgaria, based on global experience.

METHODOLOGY

This study used secondary quantitative data obtained from the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria. This study applies descriptive statistical methods, time-series analysis, and comparative analysis to examine trends in GDP contribution, employment levels, and wage dynamics in the HORECA sector for the period 2019-2024.

An indicator-based approach is used to assess the economic and social sustainability of employment, including indicators such as the sectoral GDP share, employment share, and average monthly gross salary. Cross-data analysis was applied to identify the relationships between wage growth, employment dynamics, and economic performance. Structural analysis supports the interpretation of observed trends in the context of digitalization, seasonality, and the transition to sustainable tourism. All indicators are based on the annual average values reported by the National Statistical Institute.

RESULTS

The following results summarize the main trends for the period 2019-2024.

Contribution of the HORECA sector to GDP

The tourism industry is an important pillar of Bulgaria's national economy. In 2019, the industry provided 10.6% of the total employment in the country and accounted for 10.8% of the total economic activity (Varadzhakova and al.). Due to the specifics of national statistics, the data in this report are based on data for the HORECA sector, and not on all tourism activities. In the period 2019-2024, the contribution of the HORECA sector to Bulgaria's GDP varied. Recovery has been observed after the global COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 shows the data from the national statistical institute (NSI) annual reports.

Table 1. Contribution of the HORECA sector to the formation of Bulgaria's GDP

Year	*% of GDP*
2019	5.5
2020	2.4
2021	4.5
2022	5.2
2023	6.0
2024	6.5

In 2019, the HORECA sector accounted for 5.5% of the GDP, increasing to 6.5% by 2024, indicating a sustained post-pandemic recovery. The data from the table show stable growth in the contribution of the HORECA sector to GDP formation and a high potential for the country's economy.

Employees in the HORECA sector

The tourism sector is highly dependent on human factors in terms of the number of employees as well as on the quality of work. The number of employees and their needs are specific to different tourism activities and objects, and the role of managers is to plan the necessary number, to determine the requirements for different positions such as education, experience, and competencies. Education and professional skills are the basis for planning, recruiting, and developing human resources to achieve long-term development in tourism and to increase its social and economic potential. Human resources in tourism actively participate in the development of regions in terms of poverty reduction through active work, social inclusion, and overall well-being, especially in places with limited opportunities for work and professional development.

The period of employment can be permanent or seasonal. From a social perspective, employment plays a role in providing employment opportunities at the local level, the work of local enterprises, and their associated links in the supply chain and in host destinations. This potential is dependent on a group of factors, such as the availability of resources and tourism supply in a given region, the economic structure of the organization, the capacity for entrepreneurship, and the availability of appropriately qualified and trained employees. From an economic perspective, the seasonal nature of tourism in certain regions disrupts and questions the sustainable development of human resources and social status. Table 2 presents data from the country's national statistics on the number of employees in the HORECA sector over the last few years and the percentage ratio to total employment in the country.

Table 2. Employed persons in the HORECA sector

Year	*Employed persons /average annual value/*	*Value of total employment for the country /in %/*
2019	129 252,8	5.5
2020	98 273,5	4.4
2021	98 799,75	4.3
2022	93 036,25	4.2
2023	99 958,25	4.4
2024	105 740,8	4.6

Tables 1 and 2 show that the share of the HORECA sector in GDP is increasing, while employment in the sector in 2024 remains slightly below the 2019 level, despite recovery after 2020. This indicates a partial recovery after 2020, without a full return to pre-pandemic employment levels. Moreover, from 2020 to the present, the percentage of employed people has been increasing at a slow pace. The reasons for the slow recovery of employed individuals are complex. After the global pandemic, some jobs were not restored, and employed people weare retrained in other professions. Another significant factor is the digitalization of some professions or entire professions and a reduction in the volume of work. However, the seasonality of some work is a factor that repels employed people from finding employment in the HORECA sector. The payment of human labor is not less significant. A comparative and indicator-based analysis of average monthly gross salaries was applied to assess wage dynamics and employment competitiveness in the HORECA sector.

Bulgaria has a high potential for tourism development, but as it became clear, there are also quite a few challenges from the perspective of the business environment that it must deal with. Labor remuneration is a measurable factor in the economy and a key indicator for determining the location of tourism among other industries. For this report, the Average monthly gross salary (AMGSC) is presented according to data from the National Statistical Institute in Bulgaria. This is calculated by dividing the accrued wage funds for the reporting month by the average number of employees without persons on maternity leave. (Table 3)

Table 3. Data for minimum salary in the country, average minimum gross salary for the country and AMGSC in HORECA

Year	*MS in the Country*	*AMGSC*	*AMGSC in HORECA*
	in euro		
2019	287	647	390
2020	313	705	388
2021	333	788	459
2022	364	892	533
2023	400	1021	623
2024	478	1165	752

From the data in Table 3, it can be observed that all three indicators show significant growth during the period under review. The minimum salary (MS) for the country also shows an increasing trend, which impacts the growth of average salaries. An increase in MS provides an increase in income, especially in the context of inflation. The share of MS in the country's AMGSC decreases from 44.4% in 2019 to 41% in 2024, indicating that the growth of average salaries is outpacing that of minimum salaries. For the period under review from 2019 to 2024, the AMGSC in the HORECA sector increased by 362 euro, the AMGSC for the country by 518 euro, and the MS by 191 euro. The AMGSC in HORECA remains lower than the national average, and the ratio between the AMGSC in HORECA and the AMGSC for the country is increasing, which indicates an improvement in the competitiveness of the sector (Fig. 1).

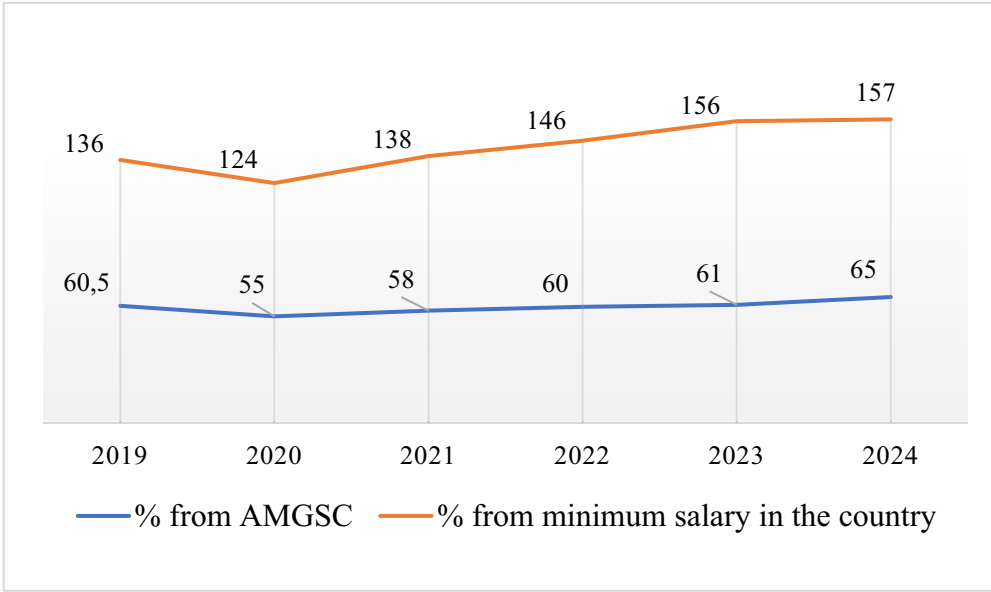

Figure 1. Percentage ratio of AMGSC in HORECA sector to AMGSC and minimum salary in the country.

Figure 1 shows an upward trend in the wage ratio between the HORECA sector and national average over the period 2019-2024. Over the observation period, the ratio increased by 21%. To illustrate the joint dynamics of GDP contribution, employment, and wage indicators over time, Figure 2 presents a composite statistical visualization for the period 2019-2024.

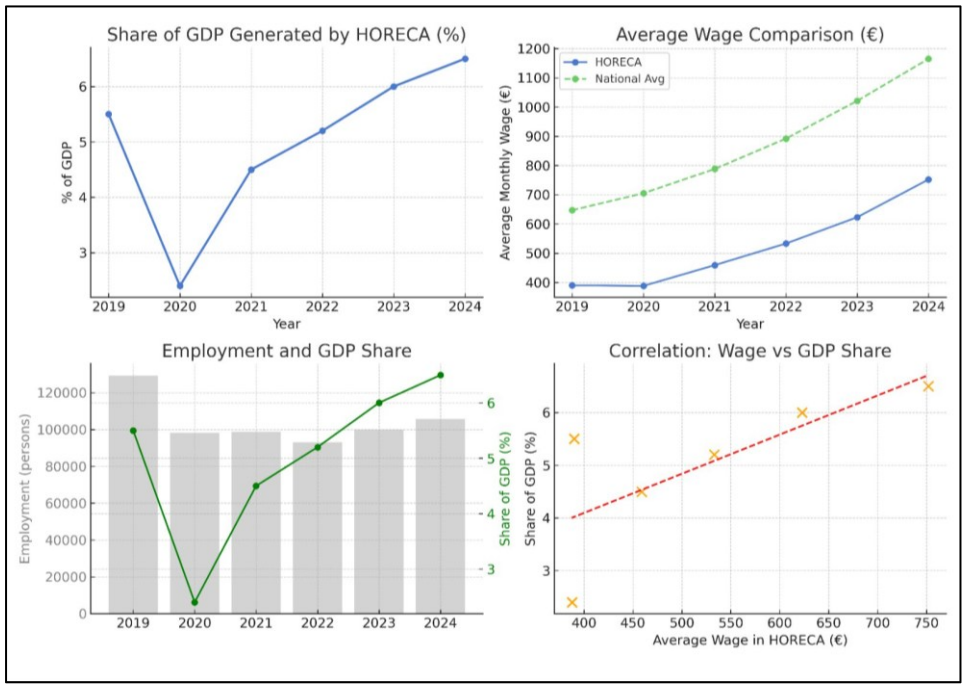

Figure 2. Dynamics and interrelations between GDP contribution, employment and wages in the HORECA sector (Bulgaria, 2019-2024)

Figure 2 provides an integrated view of the GDP contribution, employment, and wage dynamics in the HORECA sector and supports the interpretation of post-pandemic recovery trends.

The observed relationships between employment, wages, and economic performance in the HORECA sector are summarized through the analytical model presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Analytical model of human resources and sustainability in the HORECA sector

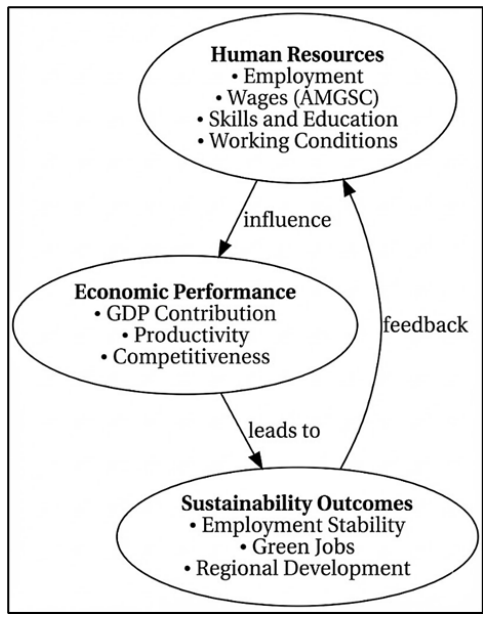

Figure 3 presents a synthetic analytical model summarizing the relationships among human resources, economic performance, and sustainability outcomes in the HORECA sector in Bulgaria. The model is based on empirical results for the period 2019-2024 and reflects the main structural tendencies identified in the analysis.

Human resources are presented as key input factors, combining employment levels, wage dynamics, skills, and working conditions.

DISCUSSION

Educational opportunities in tourism in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, there is an opportunity to train in professions while still acquiring secondary education in vocational high schools or training centers. The current list of professions for vocational education and training classifies the positions in the direction "Tourism" to "Personal Services". As of January 2025, the following directions will exist: travel, tourism and leisure, Sports, Hairdressing and beauty services, hotels, restaurants, and catering.

The next level of education is tourism colleges with various profiles in the field of "Tourism" (hotel, restaurant, leisure, etc.) and universities, where higher degrees of education in the field of tourism are acquired bachelor, master, and PhD. These academic specialties mainly prepare management and expert personnel in tourism. According to the rating system of higher education institutions in Bulgaria, professional field 3.9. Tourism was provided in the following cities: Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo, Varna (2), Blagoevgrad, Botevgrad, Sofia (3), Plovdiv (2), Burgas, Plovdiv, Shumen, and Blagoevgrad, with some having more than one university (Ranking system of higher education institutions in Bulgaria, 2025).

When discussing education, it is essential to have strategies that follow new trends. An important condition for the creation of key knowledge, skills, and competencies is the need to identify the need for new future skills and accurately determine their gaps for this endeavor to be successful, because they will turn the future worker into a bearer of the idea of sustainable development. Competencies act a connecting link between education and business. The development of knowledge and skills is justified by the quality of education, vocational training, and cooperation of universities with the private sector (Petrova, 2022).

The analytical model presented in Figure 3 supports a broader interpretation of the empirical results by highlighting the structural links among human resources, economic performance, and sustainability in the HORECA sector. The results indicate that wage growth has outpaced employment growth, reflecting adjustments in remuneration related to labor shortages and increased productivity requirements in the post-COVID-19 period.

The increasing contribution of the HORECA sector to GDP, combined with a slower employment recovery, suggests a shift toward efficiency-driven growth rather than extensive job creation. Simultaneously, economic performance is linked to employment stability and, the potential for green job creation and regional development, although these effects remain uneven due to seasonality and the dominance of small enterprises.

Despite persistent challenges, the steady increase in wages indicates an improvement in competitiveness and the potential for better working conditions. However, wages remain below the national average, underlining the importance of targeted investments in skills development, education, and sustainable employment policies. National strategies aimed at green jobs and decent working conditions provide an important framework, but their long-term impact depends on effective implementation and coordination between public institutions and employers.

Opportunities and challenges for the creation of successful and lasting sustainable jobs

Three major factors influencing the future of the workforce can be identified: new technologies related to digital transformation, transition to sustainable development, and

demographic changes (Pavlova & Petrova, 2023). This study focuses on the transition to sustainable development of tourism workers. They must be protected from work sustainably over time and in the directions that allow for this. Opportunities for human resources and organizations in the tourism sector are purposefully working towards creating green jobs.

The term "green jobs" usually refers to people working in environmentally sustainable or beneficial jobs. The International Labour Organization's Green Jobs Agenda notes the following: "jobs are green when they help reduce negative environmental impacts, ultimately leading to environmentally, economically and socially sustainable enterprises and economies." More specifically, green jobs are decent jobs that: reduce energy and raw material consumption; limit greenhouse gas emissions; minimize waste and pollution; and protect and restore ecosystems. (The Green Jobs Programme of the ILO, 2025)". Another aspect is the need to ensure safe, healthy, and adequate working conditions. Green jobs should be good for both workers and the environment (European Safety and Health Agency, 2025).

The International Labor Organization views sustainable tourism as "composed of three pillars: social justice, economic development, and environmental integrity. It is committed to improving local prosperity by maximizing the contribution of tourism to the economic prosperity of the destination, including the amount of visitor spending that is retained locally." It should generate income and decent employment for workers without affecting the environment and culture of the tourist destination and ensure the viability and competitiveness of destinations and businesses to allow them to continue to prosper and bring benefits in the long term (STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF VELIKO TARNOVO 2021-2027). At the same time, there has been a shift in societal expectations, emphasizing the role of business in protecting and preserving the environment, with companies becoming increasingly sensitive to, and committed to, social and environmental issues (Petrova, 2023).

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2024, the travel and tourism sector faces complex challenges, including geopolitical instability, economic fluctuations, inflation, and extreme weather events (Travel & Tourism Development Index, 2024). There is also a need to balance growth and sustainability, especially due to seasonality, overcrowding, and the likelihood of a return to pre-COVID-19 emissions levels. To achieve this, people who are mainly making strategic and expert decisions, must prioritize actions such as encouraging tourism to invest in a skilled, inclusive, and sustainable workforce, strategically managing visitor behavior and infrastructure development, promoting cultural exchange between visitors and local communities, and using the sector to overcome the digital lag, among other policies. If managed strategically, the travel and tourism sector has the potential to become a key factor in the well-being and prosperity of communities worldwide. In relation to training and the promotion of lifelong learning and career and life transitions, the Bulgarian Employment Agency is a key player supporting the upgrading and/or acquisition of new qualifications or skills by the workforce, including in the context of green and digital transitions (National employment action plan, 2024).

Decision and recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following findings can be drawn:

- The HORECA sector shows steady growth in its contribution to GDP, but there is a mismatch with the number of employed individuals, reflecting structural challenges, such as the automation of activities and seasonality.
- The average wage in the sector is increasing but remains below the national average. There are indications of improved competitiveness, but issues related to the shadow economy and low workforce qualifications persist.

- Tourism is socially significant for regions with limited opportunities, but the seasonal nature of employment hinders long-term sustainability.
- The education system offers a variety of learning opportunities, but there is often a lack of coordination with businesses to develop practical skills.
- The transition to sustainable tourism presents an opportunity to create green jobs and requires the strategic management and integration of sustainable practices.

Based on the findings made, the following recommendations can be made:

- Development and implementation of national policies for green jobs that consider the specific nature of employment in tourism.
- Improve staff qualifications and retraining through programs focused on green, digital, and social skills.
- Achieve regional decentralization and support small enterprises in less- developed areas through funding and tourism-oriented programs.
- Raising labor standards and implementing decent working conditions, while paying attention to the fight against the shadow economy in tourism companies and organizations.
- Manage tourism through measures that help regulate tourist flows, and implement sustainable development indicators and monitoring mechanisms.

The HORECA sector in Bulgaria shows strong growth potential but faces structural challenges such as seasonal employment, low wages, and workforce underqualification. Despite these obstacles, the shift toward sustainable tourism offers valuable opportunities for green job creation and regional development. Strategic investment in human capital and coordinated policies are key to unlocking this potential.

CONCLUSIONS

The HORECA sector in Bulgaria plays a crucial role in the national tourism industry, contributing significantly to the GDP and employment. Between 2019 and 2024, the sector showed steady growth in its economic contribution (from 5.5% to 6.5% of the GDP), highlighting its potential for both economic and social development.

Despite positive trends, the sector faces structural challenges, including seasonal employment, digitalization, automation, and workforce underqualification. Average wages are increasing but remain below the national average, with the shadow economy further limiting its development.

Education and vocational training provide opportunities to acquire key competencies, yet gaps persist between academic programmes and business needs. The coordination between educational institutions and industry is essential for developing green, digital, and social skills.

The transition to sustainable tourism presents opportunities for green jobs, combining economic growth with environmental and social responsibilities. Strategic measures, including national policies on sustainable employment, regional support for small enterprises, and management of tourist flows, are vital to unlocking this potential.

The long-term sustainability of the HORECA sector in Bulgaria depends primarily on strategic investment in human capital, including skill development, alignment of education with industry needs, and the implementation of green and digital policies. Effective human resource management and the creation of sustainable jobs are key factors in strengthening tourism development in the long term.

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RESEARCH ABOUT TOURIST-TO-TOURIST INTERACTION AND PROSOCIALITY ON EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM

Casandra-Mariana Mănica[1]

ABSTRACT: *This research presents the main considerations regarding the connection between tourist-to-tourist interaction and prosociality on experiential tourism, as well as the beneficial effects resulting from tourists' interaction in certain tours and programs. The purpose of the study is to show what are the impact of tourist-to-tourist interaction and the prosocial implications expressed by tourists during and after visiting certain tourist destinations. Data were collected through a field experiment for three months and analyzed on a sample of 107 tourists who participated in cultural and religious tours and programs. The research methodology of this study was the analysis, the descriptive method and the experimental method using a quantitative research instrument, the questionnaire. The main results show the multitude of beneficial and multiplying effects that each tourist can obtain from participation in certain tours and programs, psychological implications with a major therapeutic role in improving their well-being as well as the emotional and general health of tourists. The importance of the study is far-reaching. The findings can contribute to the development of experiential tourism research from the perspective of tourist-to-tourist interaction and prosociality by examining the interaction impact among tourists during the development of tourism programs.*

KEYWORDS: *experiential tourism, general and emotional health, prosociality, tourist-to-tourist interaction, tours and programs*

INTRODUCTION

This study broadly examines the different dimensions of human life that, in various combinations, are said to enhance quality of life and capacities to contribute to well-being: social, mental, emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual, and cultural (Clissold et al., 2022). Social interactions play a vital role in everyday life by fulfilling individuals' need for belonging and connecting with others (Bernstein et al., 2018).

Social interactions are related to positive physical and psychological health such as reducing stress and increasing positive emotions. Social interactions are also a critical component of tourist experience since tourist experience is created through tourists' interactions with other people and places. The level of friendship within tour groups is one of the most important determinants of tourism experience quality. In this sense, the tourism interactions play the roles of strengthening or weakening social relations (Lin et al., 2019).

Mainstream emotion literature and tourism emotion contributions are critically analyzed and discussed. This study explores the nature of tourism experiences, particularly in terms of personal outcomes, emotions and meanings, by investigating tourists' experiences during cultural and religious tourism programs. It is found that there is a need to understand tourism consumption experiences beyond the hedonic joy of the moment and to consider their broader implications for ensuring human well-being and quality of life (Knobloch et al., 2017).

Tourist-to-tourist interaction and prosocial implications are very important factors that affect the entire tourist experience. Social interaction in tourism is a powerful communication tool that is prevalent among tourists, communities, receptionists, tour guides, tourism enterprises and others. The emotions induced by tourists' participation in social interaction play an important role in tourists' behavioral intention. Emotions not only directly predict individual behavior, but also indirectly influence individual behavior through attitudinal variables (Zhou et al., 2023).

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Travel offers people opportunities to escape from their routine social networks to some extent, making anonymity a natural part of tourism. In addition, during their vacations, tourists may exhibit attitudes and behaviors that are significantly different from their everyday attitudes and behaviors. Since individuals enjoy their travel experiences not only through seeking novelty, but also through meeting and communicating with other travelers who are also seeking similar experiences, interactions with other tourists play an important role in the travel experience formation process.

Understanding how tourist-to-tourist interaction influences tourists' experiences can help tour operators develop and design tourism experiences that can improve the attractiveness of their offerings. Thus, examination of tourist-to-tourist interaction, its antecedents and its impacts on tourists' experiences, attitudes and behaviors are critical for both academics and practitioners (Lin et al., 2019).

The paper is structured as follows: the next section provides a comprehensive literature review, summarizing relevant research and studies. The third section explores the research methodology used, analysis, descriptive method and experimental method using the questionnaire as a quantitative research instrument. The fourth section presents the results obtained and their discussion within this research. Finally, the concluding section summarizes the paper's final findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focus upon the acknowledged benefits of tourist-to-tourist encounters through productive interactions among tourists rather than focusing on interactions between tourists and service providers (Pandey, Kumar & Ali, 2025). Although previous research has widely acknowledged the critical role that tourist interaction and prosocial implications play in experiential tourism, there is limited evidence on the impact that these factors have on the formation of tourists' self-image or on their intention to return or recommend a particular tourist destination to others. When a person is stimulated, an internal state (emotion) is aroused. Subsequently, the internal state affects human behavior. Tourists' emotional experiences are related to satisfaction, which in turn have a significant influence on behavioral intentions (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). Prosociality are based on the notion of sharing, donating and helping others. Prosociality is positively correlated with religiosity (Stamatoulakis, 2013). Much of the research on prosociality has highlighted prosociality in what can be called the interpersonal domain, for example, helping others. Prosociality among tourists refers to dispositions and behaviors intended to benefit others, where these dispositions reflect people's values (Nezlek, 2022).

Emiroglu et al. (2017) consider that the customer experience in tourism is affected by various factors in the service landscape, including the physical environment and social interactions. Tourists will respond behaviorally based on their emotions, which are influenced by their moral norms and thus determine further tourist-to-tourist interaction behavior responses. Tourists experiencing happy emotions throughout their vacation are more inclined to engage in socially-positive behaviors, whereas those experiencing negative emotions are more prone to avoidance (Tang et al., 2025). Experiential tourism and the quest to create memorable and extraordinary experiences for customers have become essential for tour operators. The implications between tourism providers and experiential tourism are essential in this regard (Knobloch et al., 2017).

Research on emotions is extensive in history, sociology, philosophy and psychology. Fleeting but powerful, emotions are associated with individuals' biological makeup, shaped by their experiences and related to personal mental associations. Emotions are cognitive linguistic

constructs used to give meaning to affective states. Emotional meaning is what differentiates humans from the animal world. We can assess the emotional meanings given to affective states. However, the nature of affect is self-responsive and instinctual (Titz, 2009).

In the context of tourism, research on emotions has recently expanded its scope, although it remains largely rooted in consumer behavior, often embedded in cognitive psychology. Emotional experiences, both positive and negative, are critical in shaping behavioral intentions. Tourism scholars have explored the nature of emotions in holiday settings, highlighting the complexity of the concept. Emotions play a central role in tourists' cognitive evaluations and behavioral responses, and undoubtedly, tourism experiences can provide a wealth of emotions for tourists (Volo, 2021). In this context, research on experiential tourism can benefit from a deeper understanding of tourists' emotions and their interaction with the experiences they have while traveling.

Meaningful tourism experiences are the result of individuals' participation in the creative process. The emotions that tourists evoke during their vacation play a crucial role in their final cognitive evaluations and behavioral responses: only truly personalized and unique co-creation experiences will thrive in the competitive marketplace (Volo, 2017). Such experiences are based on the creation of various innovative, spectacular and sensory stimuli that involve tourists to identify with them and/or to participate and co-create. To obtain a "real" response in a tourist experience, it is necessary to stimulate emotions with which tourists are able to identify (Jelinčić & Senkić, 2019).

In most cases, tourism activities take place in unfamiliar or in somewhat familiar locations over a short period of time and are often associated with certain levels of hedonism. This makes tourist-to-tourist interaction different from interpersonal interactions in everyday contexts in terms of mode, content and depth. During travel, individuals' everyday roles and statuses play less important roles, and thus they interact with each other with less inhibition. Friendly conversation has significant positive relationships with life satisfaction and social connectedness, while unfriendly behavior is negatively related to social connectedness. Social connectedness has a significant prosocial relationship with life satisfaction and plays a mediating role between tourist-to-tourist interaction and life satisfaction (Liu et al., 2022).

The study of social relationships between one person and another during the tourism experience has not received enough attention. The study of human social relationships is an important issue and offers a unique perspective in the study of the tourist experience. Social relationships are an integral part of tourism-related services and tourist consumption is indelibly social. To explain the consumption of tourist services, one cannot separate the social relationships that occur during the consumption of these services. In fact, tourist-to-tourist interaction and the quality of the social relationship between tourists have a great influence on the quality of the tourist experience. Therefore, it is necessary to study the context of the tourist experience related to the presence or absence of others. When another tourist is present, the tourists can collectively view a landscape or a landmark, or they can interact with each other if such a landmark is absent. If others are absent, the tourist sees such landmarks alone (Dan, 2013).

In group travel, tourist-to-tourist interaction is an important prosocial relationship. Not only could this relationship influence the tourist experience, but also this relationship could influence the subjective well-being of tourists. The positive tourist-to-tourist interaction could enhance the prosocial bonding between tourists and could also improve tourists' subjective well-being. Conversely, passive tourist-to-tourist interaction has a negative impact either on social bonding or tourists' subjective well-being. Social bonding acts as a partial mediator on the relationship between tourist-to-tourist interaction and subjective well-being (Chen Ye et al.,

2017).

It is widely recognized that interactions between tourists significantly influence behavioral reactions, such as willingness to stay, satisfaction, and loyalty, which are important for the development and the management of tourism destinations. However, it is generally agreed that meeting people and creating new relationships are essential parts of the experience, resulting from tourists' interactions with various physical and social elements. As such, shared time and space make tourist-to-tourist interaction essential to the overall tourist experience, which has been recognized in traditional service management frameworks (Sun et al., 2019).

Tourist interactions have maintained a growing significance in the tourism literature. However, existing research that emphasizes dyadic-based questions has become less relevant to the dynamism of the tourism service encounter in which tourist-to-tourist interactions take place; and therefore, more dynamic perspectives that fully explore this phenomenon will prevail (Lin & Wong, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research is to show the importance of tourist-to-tourist interaction and prosociality on experiential tourism as well as the various benefits obtained for their general and emotional health when they participate in certain tours and programs. These trips are beneficial for relationships and socializing. Social interactions are related to positive physical and psychological health such as relieving stress and enhancing positive emotions. Practicing experiential tourism helps people unlock and use their own resources creatively in a process of conscious evolution based on freedom of choice and responsibility. This research will be developed by following the specific research objectives.

These specific objectives of the research were:

-identifying the connection between tourist-to-tourist interaction and prosociality on experiential tourism resulting from tourist participation in certain tours and programs;

-identifying and evaluating the emotional benefits resulting from trips and identifying the cultural, social, emotional and medical advantages that the participants can obtain during any trip;

-analysis of the scientific literature regarding the multiple advantages and implications of tourist-to-tourist interaction and prosocial implications on experiential tourism and tourist emotional health;

-analysis of data collected through the quantitative research tool, the questionnaire; presentation of socio-medical and emotional benefits resulting from tourists' participation in certain trips;

-dissemination of research results and the final conclusions.

As part of the research, I used the questionnaire to collect information about the social and emotional benefits resulting from participation of tourists in specific tours and programs. The questionnaire was created in Google Forms from the Google Docs ePlatform. Compliance with the legal provisions on the protection of personal data was insured. The research was carried out between December the 1st 2024 and March the 1st 2025.

The questions of the questionnaire were formulated in accordance with the mentioned objectives. In developing the questionnaire, I paid special attention to both the general rules recommended by theory for the realization of questionnaires, as well as those aimed at the form of presentation: formulation of questions, their sequence, balance between closed and open questions. The questions included in the questionnaire were of two types: closed questions with precoded answers options, dichotomous (yes/no type) or multiple (with ordinal scale in 5 steps with the following meanings: 1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = rather disagree, 4 = rather

agree, 5 = totally agree) and an open question with the role of identifying research attributes.

The questionnaire was structured in such a way as to lead to obtaining relevant, correct and complete information to identify the beneficial and multiplying effects that can be achieved by each tourist following participation in cultural and religious tours and programs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the data collected on the tourists' responses to the questionnaire, it appears that 107 tourists participated in the study, including 82 women (76,6%) and 25 men (23,4%). The larger number of women shows the greater inclination of the female gender towards trips, emotions and religion. The respondents included in the study are aged between 18 and 75 years. 56,1% of the respondents who participated in this study are aged between 18 and 45 years old.

Among the respondents, 34,5% increased high school education, 23,4% increased graduate education and 42,1% increased master and doctoral education. The largest number of respondents included in the study is represented by tourists with higher education (65,5%). 75,4% represent tourists from the urban environment and 24,6% represent tourists from the rural environment. Some of the respondents, namely 16,8% are still students while 38,3% are employed, 3,7% are self-employed, 5,6% are unemployed, 34,6% are retirees and only 1 % are entrepreneurs.

Regarding the monthly income, 26,2% of the respondents obtain incomes below 2500 ron, 14% obtain incomes between 2501-3500 ron, 21,5% obtain incomes over 5500 ron, 17,7% obtain incomes between 4501-5500 ron and only 20,6% obtain incomes between 3501-4500 ron.

Related to the question: How much do you like to travel, where 1 represents very little and 5 very much? 80,4% of respondents gave the maximum value 5, 13,1% gave the value 4, 5,6% gave the value 3 while only 0% of respondents gave the value 2 and only 0,9% gave the minimum value 1 (Figure 1).

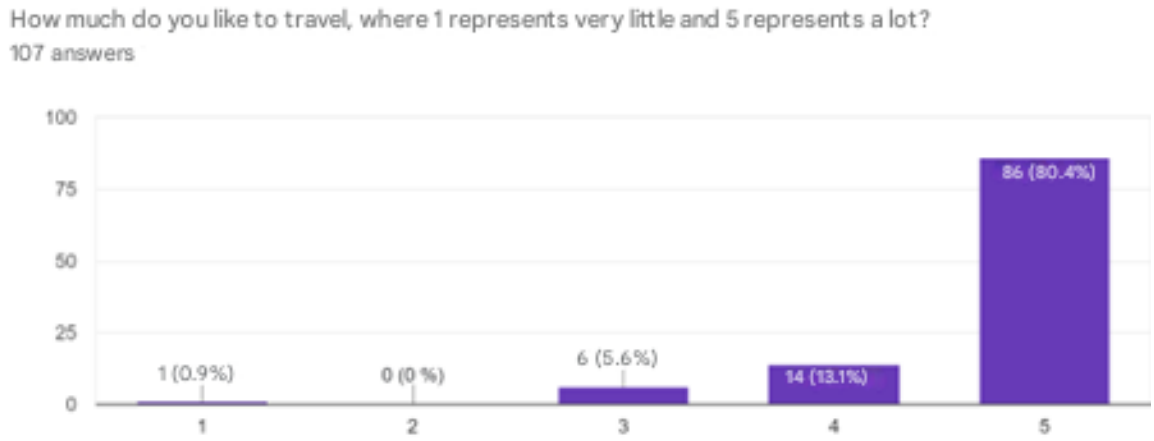


Figure 1. The respondent's percentage answers to the question: How much do you like to travel?

Source: created by the author

Therefore, we can consider that the most participants of this study love to travel and interact with each other whatever the destination visited, or the tourist attractions are included in the travel program.

Another representative question of this study asked to the respondents was: How often do you travel on tours and tourist programs of any kind? where 43% of tourists answered several times a year, 21,5% of respondents travel on tours and tourist programs once a week or more often, 14% of respondents answered two or three times a month, 11,2% of respondents answered once a month, 8,4% of respondents answered once a year or less and finally and only 1,9% of respondents answered never (Figure 2).

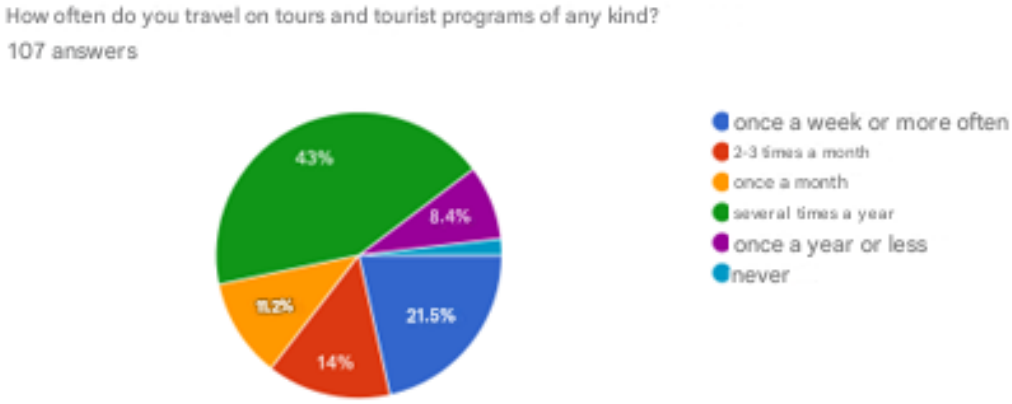


Figure 2. The respondent's percentage answers to the question: How often do you travel on tours and tourist programs of any kind?
Source: created by the author

The obtained results demonstrate that almost half of the people travel several times a year on tours and tourist programs of any kind (43%), a significant percentage of respondents (25,2%) travel one, two or three times on a month and another significant percentage of respondents, namely 21,5%, travel on excursions and programs once a week or more often. If we consider the fact that most of respondents of this study are women and they are youngers or adults who put a particular emphasis on interacting with new people for more life experiences, prosociality and pleasant memories, we can conclude that the tendency to travel in any type of tourist programs is oriented more than a half towards younger or adult people aged between 18 and 45 years (56,1%) and almost half towards elder people or retirees (43,9%).

At the question: When you go on vacation, do you choose certain tourist destinations to which you are emotionally attached, which have a sentimental meaning for you? 31,8% of respondents answered sometimes yes, sometimes no, 32,7% of respondents answered yes, every time I travel, 20,6% of respondents answered yes, many times, 12,1% of respondents answered rare and only 2,8% of respondents answered no, I never choose a tourist destination that have emotional meaning for me (Figure 3).

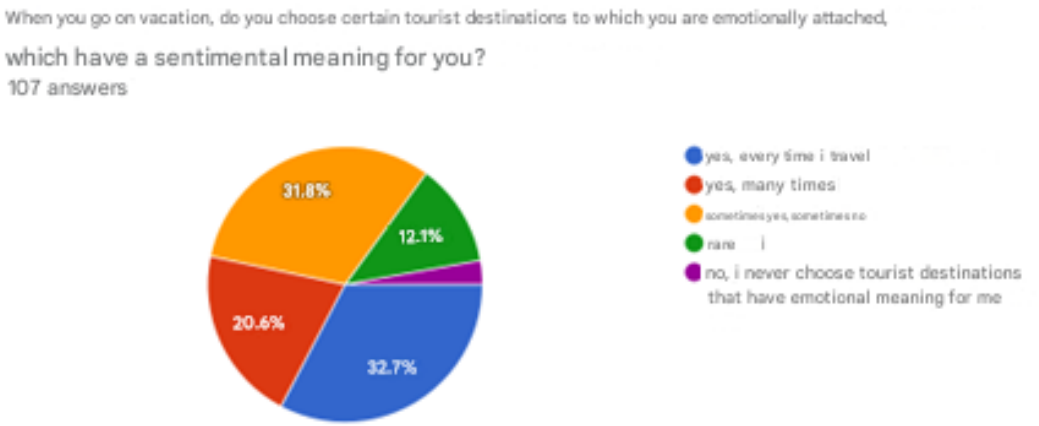
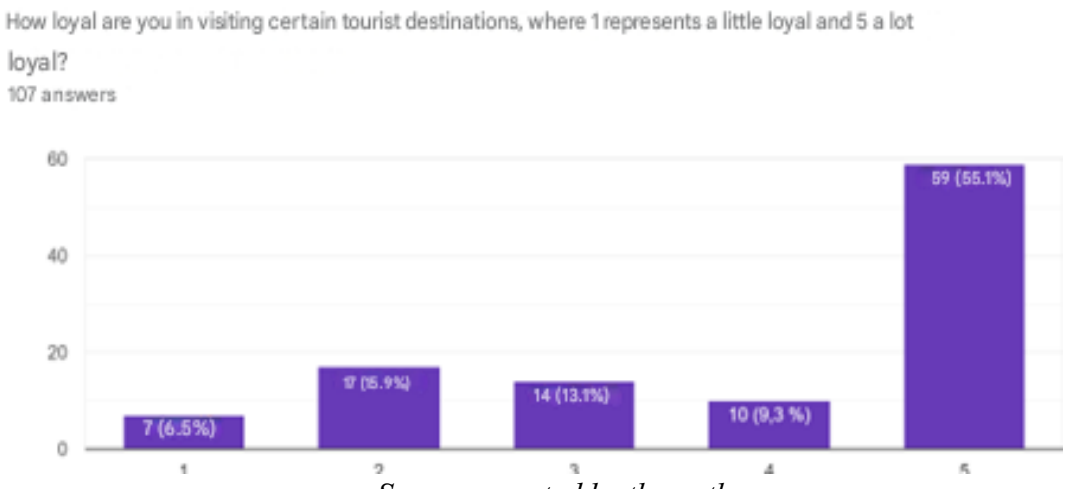


Figure 3. When you go on vacation, do you choose certain tourist destinations to which you are emotionally attached, which have a sentimental meaning for you?
Source: created by the author

The results show that the most of respondents, 53,3%, choose certain tourist destinations to which they are emotionally attached and which have a sentimental meaning for them. However, a percentage of 31,8% of respondents answered that they sometimes choose tourist destinations they are emotionally attached to and sometimes not. This means that when they choose the tourist destinations where they go on vacation, tourists are influenced by other decision-making factors besides emotional factors. And finally, only 12,1% of respondents consider that that there is no emotional factor in choosing their tourist destination. Therefore, a very large number of tourists choose to visit certain tourist destinations for emotional and attachment reasons.

And finally, at the question: How loyal are you in visiting certain tourist destinations, where 1 represents a little loyal and five a lot loyal? 55,1% of respondents gave the maximum value 5, 9,3% gave the value 4, 13,1% gave the value 3 while only 15,9% of respondents gave the value 2 and another 6,5% gave the minimum value 1 (Figure 4).

Figure 4. How loyal are you in visiting certain tourist destinations, where 1 represents a little loyal and five a lot loyal?



Source: created by the author

Therefore, we can conclude that most participants from this study are loyal in visiting certain tourist destinations, they love to interact and visit various tourist attractions on which they are emotionally attached.

The results show that the impact of tourist-to-tourist interaction and the emotional implications on experiential tourism are very important factors that affect the whole tourist experience. The study findings also highlight the salience of emotions in understanding tourist responses to hedonic services. Specifically, pleasure is positively linked to both satisfaction and loyalty behaviors.

I believe that future extensive analysis of the practical implications for pleasure-based services, including most experiential services such as leisure, and travel services, should be considered.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has shown that prosocial interactions are related to positive physical and psychological health such as relieving stress and enhancing positive emotions. The visitors exhibited a variation in emotions depending on the places visited, their activities, and the people they encountered. It is concluded that the ability to measure travelers' emotions in real time and in natural settings leads to new knowledge about the relationship between travelers' emotions and the physical and social environments, which, in turn, provides a useful basis for designing and managing tourism experiences.

These findings contribute to the development of tourism experience research from the perspective of tourist-to-tourist interaction and the social interaction literature by examining the unique interaction mechanism between tourists. Also, the findings of this study are beneficial for understanding the social benefits of tourist-to-tourist interaction from the perspective of social psychology.

Finally, based on the results, this paper provides some suggestions for tourism companies to improve their services. Tourism companies and tour guides should manage compatibility with tourists and try to ensure that tourists of a given tour group are from the same organization, community, or place, which allows for more in-depth communications; increase social support, such as creating a favorable atmosphere, introducing members to each other, organizing group activities, encouraging members to communicate and help each other. Because these measures activate tourist-to-tourist interaction, which can improve social bonding and subjective well-being; adopt measures to resolve contradictions when there are misunderstandings or even conflicts between tourists, avoiding passive tourist-to-tourist interaction.

Furthermore, the findings of this study are expected to provide further insight on how to improve benefits for both tourists and tourism service providers by managing tourist-to-tourist interactions. Consequently, future research is suggested to adopt interdependent, coevolutionary, and/or integrated perspectives to expand the current tourism literature.

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SANTA CRUZ CABRÁLIA: CHALLENGES IN ENHANCING THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE WITH LIMITED INFRASTRUCTURE

Jerusa Ribeiro Pires de Brandão e Silva[1], Amanda Raquel de França Filgueiras D Amorim[2], Elídio Vanzella[3]

ABSTRACT: *Santa Cruz Cabrália is a coastal tourist town in the state of Bahia, Brazil, with a population of approximately 31,000. The local economy relies heavily on tourism, and despite its significant natural and historical potential, there are signs of shortcomings in public management as well as in the behavior of some residents and visitors. In this context, this study aims to describe the perceptions of residents and tourists regarding the town and to identify improvements needed to better accommodate visitors. The methodology combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze data collected through questionnaires. The results indicate that the presence of the German national soccer team in 2014 brought international visibility to the town and generated a social and economic legacy, particularly through the Campo Bahia Resort. The municipality thus carries both the historical legacy associated with the discovery of Brazil and the more recent marks left by prominent visitors. However, road-based tourism creates a number of challenges, especially during holidays and peak tourist seasons. The town lacks adequate infrastructure for tour buses and alternative routes to improve traffic circulation, which affects urban mobility and the overall tourist experience.*

KEYWORDS*: Tourism; Responsibility; Preservation.*

INTRODUCTION

Santa Cruz Cabrália, located on the coast of Bahia, is a small tourist town with an estimated population of 31,007 inhabitants (IBGE, 2025). The municipality is part of the Discovery Coast, a region composed of three cities: Porto Seguro, Santa Cruz Cabrália, and Belmonte. This area holds particular historical significance, as it is widely recognized as the place where Brazil's colonial history began. On April 22, 1500, the Portuguese fleet commanded by Pedro Álvares Cabral arrived in the region and established first contact with Indigenous peoples.

During the peak tourist season, the number of visitors increases substantially, revealing limitations in the city's urban infrastructure to accommodate this demand. Road-based tourism, particularly organized excursions and private vehicles, causes several inconveniences for local residents, including frequent traffic congestion. The city has only one paved access road, BR 367 (Beira Mar Avenue), which connects Cabrália to Coroa Vermelha. Consequently, during peak holiday periods such as Christmas and New Year's Eve, the city experiences long traffic jams. These problems are further aggravated by the lack of adequate infrastructure for tour buses, including the absence of alternative circulation routes and designated parking areas.

Although the local economy is driven by tourism, and despite the region's natural beauty and considerable tourism potential, local public management has not provided the level of attention necessary to support sustainable development. As a result, visible signs of neglect can be observed, both in terms of public administration and in the behavior of residents and visitors.

In this context, the objective of this study is to examine the perceptions of residents and tourists regarding the town and, more specifically, to identify areas for improvement in order to better accommodate tourists.

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METHODOLOGY

The study was characterized as exploratory and descriptive in nature. A mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses, was used to examine the data collected through a digital questionnaire distributed to groups and individual participants. Data collection began on January 29, 2026, and responses were gathered over a one-week period. Participants were also encouraged to forward the questionnaire to their contacts, resulting in a snowball sampling process. The results were tabulated in spreadsheets, analyzed, and presented below.

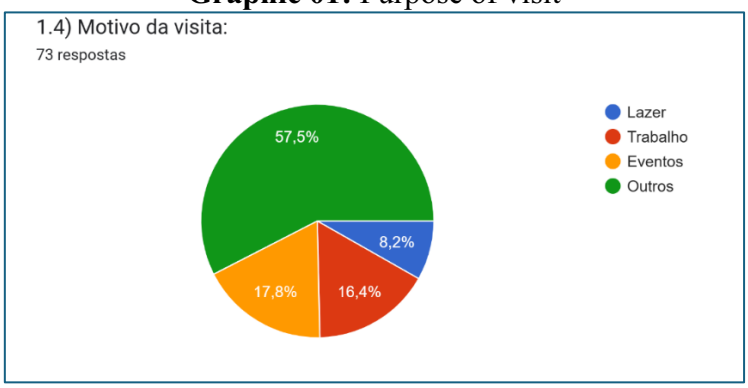
ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

According to the questionnaire results, 57.5% of respondents were male and 42.5% were female. In terms of age distribution, most respondents were between 36 and 50 years old (42.5%), followed by those over 50 (41.1%). Smaller proportions were aged 26–35 (12.3%), under 18 (2.7%), and 18–25 (1.4%).

Regarding respondents' profiles, 69.9% were residents of Santa Cruz Cabrália, 28.8% were domestic tourists, and 1.4% were international tourists.

When asked about their reason for visiting the city, 57.5% selected "other," followed by events (17.8%), work-related reasons (16.4%), and leisure (8.2%).

Graphic 01: Purpose of visit



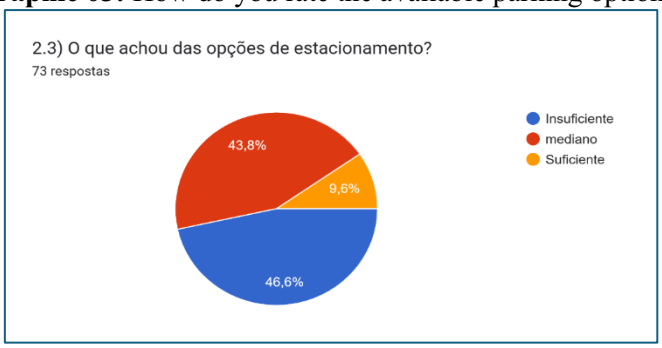
Road access was rated as fair by 30.1% of respondents, good by 24.7%, very good by 23.3%, and poor by 21.9%.

When assessing the adequacy of infrastructure for tour buses, 54.8% described it as inadequate, 28.8% preferred not to express an opinion, and 16.4% considered it adequate.

Graphic 02: Is the infrastructure for tour buses adequate?

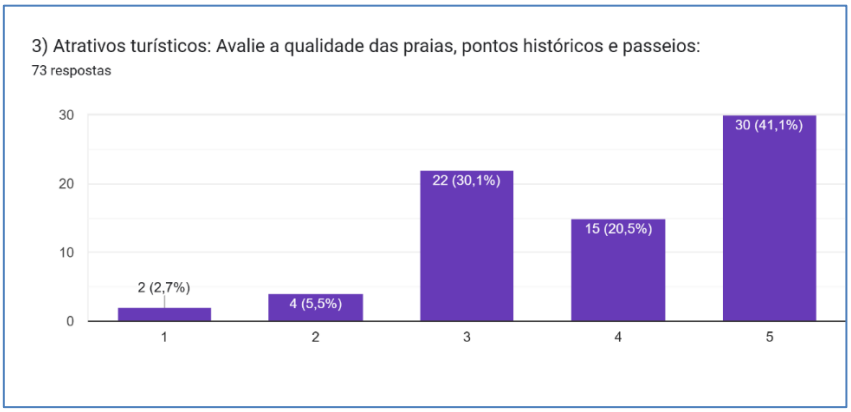
Parking infrastructure was considered insufficient by 46.6% of respondents, rated as average by 43.8%, and considered sufficient by 9.6%.

Graphic 03: How do you rate the available parking options?



The evaluation of the quality of beaches, historical sites, and tours indicated that 41.1% rated them as very good, 30.1% as fair, 20.5% as good, 5.5% as poor, and 2.7% as very poor.

Graphic 04: Tourist Attractions: Please rate the quality of the beaches, historical sites, and tours.



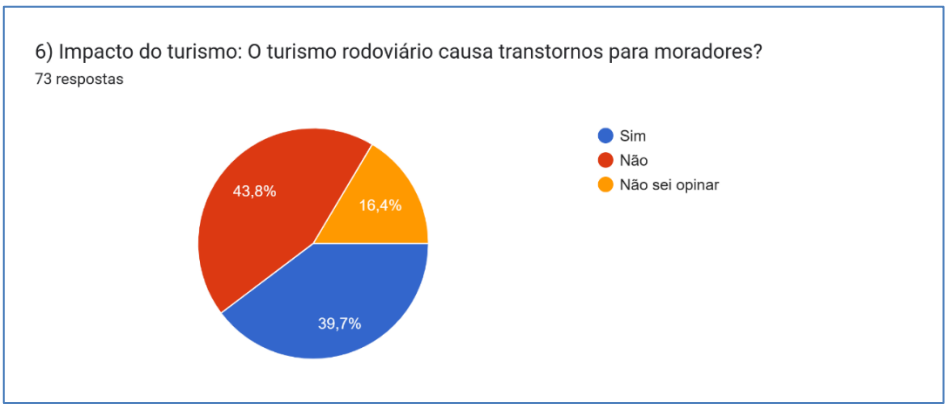
In terms of proper waste disposal, 86.3% of respondents reported disposing of waste correctly, while 13.7% indicated that they did not. Although this represents a positive outcome, the results suggest the need for additional educational campaigns to educate both tourists and residents.

When asked about perceived safety at tourist attractions, 50.7% of respondents reported feeling safe, 39.7% reported feeling unsafe, 6.8% very unsafe, and 2.7% very safe.

Graphic 05: Public Safety: How safe do you feel at tourist sites?

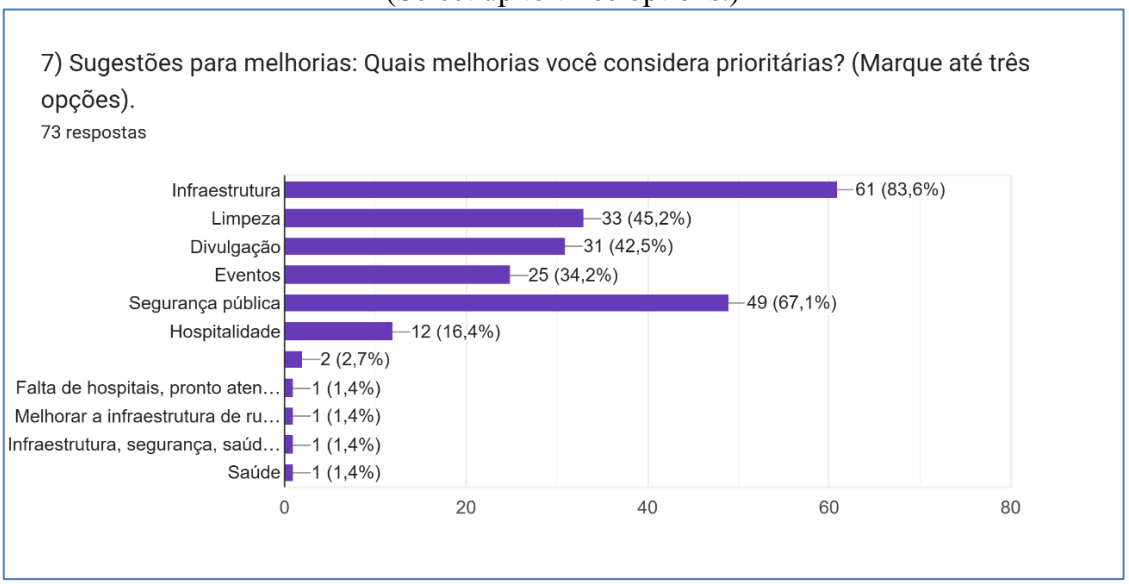
Respondents were also asked about the perceived impact of tourism on the town. While 43.8% stated that road-based tourism does not cause inconvenience to residents, 39.7% believed that it does, and 16.4% were unsure.

Graphic 06: Tourism Impact: Does tourism-related road traffic cause inconvenience for residents?



Priority improvements identified by respondents included infrastructure (83.6%), followed by public safety (67.1%), public cleanliness (45.2%), tourism promotion (42.5%), events (34.2%), and hospitality (16.4%). An additional 1.4% mentioned the lack of hospitals, emergency care services, and pharmacies in Santo André, a village in Cabrália located on the opposite side of the João de Tiba River and accessible only by ferry. Another 1.4% cited the need for road improvements, support for small businesses, and improvements in public health services. Respondents were allowed to select up to three options for this question; therefore, the total percentage exceeds 100%.

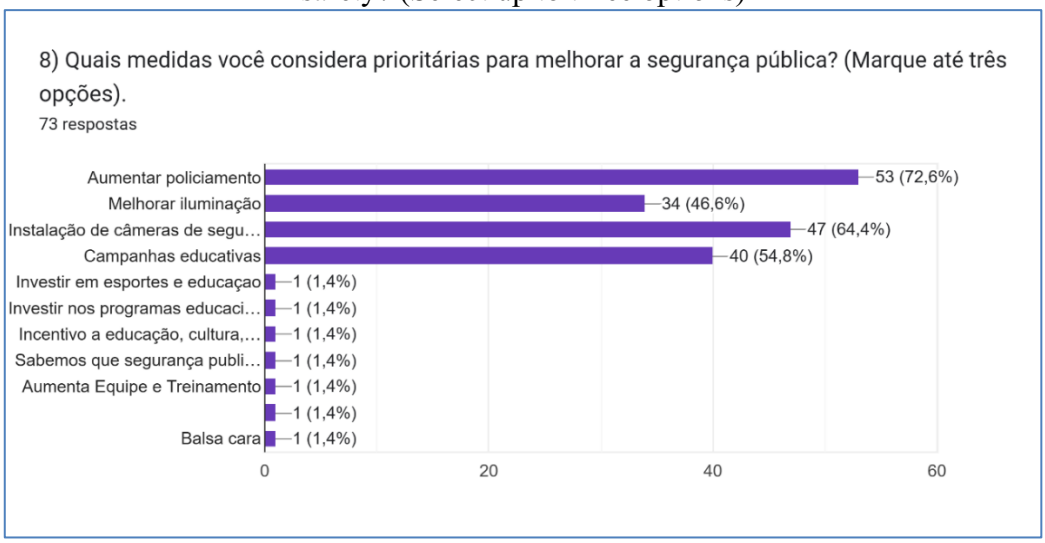
Graphic 07: Suggestions for Improvement: Which improvements should be prioritized? (Select up to three options.)



The survey on public safety priorities indicated that increased police presence was the most frequently cited measure (72.6%), followed by the installation of surveillance cameras (64.4%), educational campaigns (54.8%), and improvements in street lighting (46.6%). A

further 1.4% highlighted the need for greater investment in sports, education, and culture, as well as the creation of adequate working conditions and housing for the municipality's security forces. These respondents also emphasized the high cost of the ferry. As in the previous question, respondents were allowed to select up to three options; therefore, the total percentage exceeds 100%, as shown in the chart below.

Graphic 08: Public Safety: Which measures should be prioritized to improve public safety? (Select up to three options)



FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Brazilian coastline stretches for thousands of kilometers and offers a wide range of opportunities for beach-and-sun tourism. However, these natural attributes alone do not guarantee visitor loyalty. It is essential for a destination to offer distinctive characteristics and experiences that differentiate it from other destinations. In Santa Cruz Cabrália, factors such as warm waters, history, culture, and regional identity attract tourists from different parts of the world to the so-called Discovery Coast, the place where Pedro Álvares Cabral's fleet arrived on April 22, 1500, marking the beginning of Brazil's colonial history. The Discovery Coast is composed of three cities: Porto Seguro, Santa Cruz Cabrália, and Belmonte.

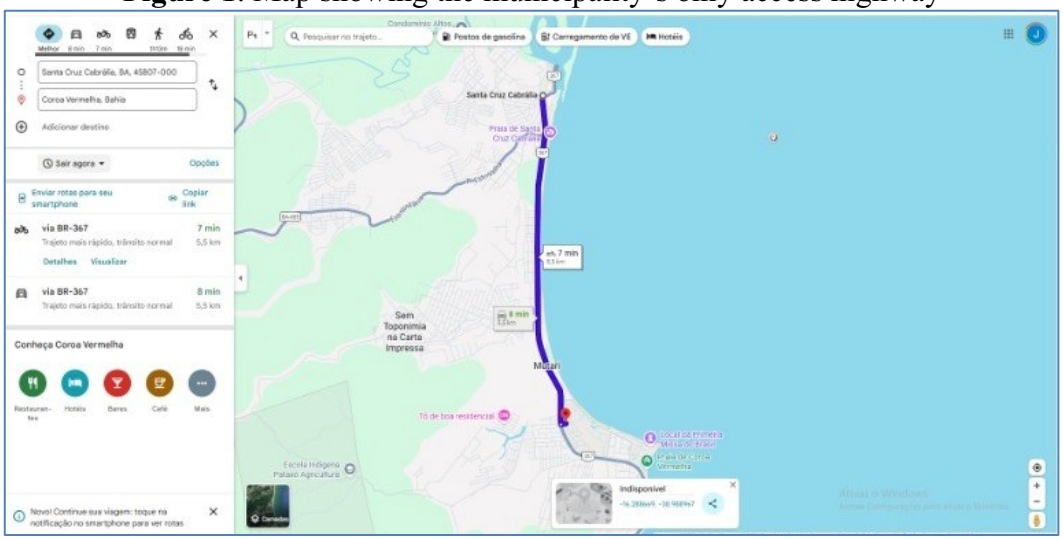
According to the Department of Tourism and Economic Development, the municipality currently offers an average of 6,000 accommodation beds, including inns, hotels, and resorts (PSCC, 2024). This figure reflects the significant impact of the German national team's stay in the village of Santo André, which is part of Cabrália. Over the past 10 years, the number of beds, along with renovations, and the construction of tourism-related developments, has more than doubled, representing an increase of approximately 60%.

Another noteworthy milestone was the presence of the German men's national soccer team during the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. The team stayed in the village of Santo André, which belongs to the municipality, bringing international visibility to the area and leaving a legacy of social responsibility. The Campo Bahia Resort, built by German entrepreneurs to host the team, continues to generate income and employment for the local community while also contributing to the promotion of Cabrália as a tourist destination (GE, 2024). The city therefore carries both the historical legacy associated with the arrival of the Portuguese in Brazil and contemporary influences left by notable international visitors.

A notable issue related to tourism is the impact of road-based tourism. This situation is explained by the fact that the city has only one paved access road, BR-367 (Beira-Mar Avenue),

which connects Cabrália and Coroa Vermelha. During periods of high demand, such as Christmas and New Year's Eve, the city experiences significant traffic congestion. The problem is further aggravated by the lack of adequate infrastructure for tour buses, as well as the lack of alternative routes and parking areas specifically designated for buses.

Figure 1. Map showing the municipality's only access highway



Source: *Google Maps*

Although 43.8% of respondents stated that road-based tourism does not cause inconvenience to residents, 39.7% believed that it does create inconvenience, while 16.4% did not know how to respond. Regarding parking availability, 46.6% reported that parking options are insufficient, 43.8% considered them adequate, and 9.8% described them as sufficient. In addition, 54.8% indicated that infrastructure for tour buses is inadequate, 28.8% did not know how to respond, and 16.4% considered the infrastructure adequate.

By combining the positive responses related to urban infrastructure, the results show the following: 43.8% reported that road-based tourism does not cause inconvenience to residents, 9.8% stated that parking options are sufficient, and 16.4% indicated that bus infrastructure is adequate. Together, these results represent a 64.49% approval rate for the urban infrastructure of Santa Cruz Cabrália in relation to road-based tourism.

The sum of the negative responses regarding urban infrastructure shows that 39.7% of respondents stated that road-based tourism causes inconvenience to residents, 46.6% reported that parking options are insufficient, and 54.8% considered bus infrastructure inadequate. When combined, these responses total 141.1%, indicating a high level of dissatisfaction with the municipality's urban infrastructure in relation to road-based tourism.

Respondents who did not express an opinion, together with those who evaluated the infrastructure as average, accounted for the following results: 16.4% did not express an opinion regarding the inconvenience caused by road-based tourism, 43.8% considered parking options to be average, and 28.8% did not express an opinion regarding infrastructure for tour buses, totaling 72.76%. It should be noted that these values correspond to the sum of three different charts (300%), each representing 100% of responses. For this reason, the combined percentage of negative responses reaches 141.1%.

These results indicate the need for investments in urban infrastructure, which can enhance the value of the destination and increase visitor satisfaction, thereby encouraging repeat visits. Incorporating local attractions, identity, culture, and traditions into the annual events calendar can also facilitate the promotion of the city at tourism fairs, a strategy already

adopted by the hotel industry when marketing travel packages in advance.

Tourism fairs, held throughout the year, serve as meeting points for professionals in the tourism industry, including inbound tour operators, hoteliers, innkeepers, tour operators, travel agencies, and travel agents. At these events, business deals are negotiated, information is exchanged, and partnerships are established. The presence of specialized media also contributes to the promotion of the destination, which is amplified through the use of technology and reaches both national and international audiences.

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INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE AS A RESOURCE FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE CITY OF ZAJEČAR

Maja Simonović Stojčić[1], Lenka Istijanović[2], Miodrag Velojić[3], Tatjana Pivac[4]

ABSTRACT: *Industrial heritage is an important but underutilized resource, especially for the development of sustainable tourism. This is especially evident in post-industrial and post-socialist environments. This paper examines the potential of the industrial heritage of the city of Zaječar as a resource for the sustainable development of tourism, with a special focus on the former industrial complexes of the glass factory "Kristal" and the porcelain factory "Porcelan". The research is based on a qualitative approach and the application of the case study method, through the analysis of the historical, spatial, physical and symbolic characteristics of the selected industrial sites, as well as their current state and the possibility of revitalization using the adaptive reuse approach. The analysis relies on secondary sources, field observations and visual documentation. The results indicate that, despite years of neglect and physical degradation, both industrial complexes have significant development potential. This results from their favorable spatial position in the urban part of the city, quality industrial architecture and strong intangible heritage preserved in the collective memory of the local community. The work indicates that the industrial heritage of Zaječar does not represent the basis for the development of mass tourism, but above all the potential for shaping thematically oriented, experientially based and sustainable tourist content aligned with the local identity.*

KEYWORDS: *Industrial heritage; adaptive reuse; sustainable tourism development; industrial tourism; Zaječar*

INTRODUCTION

Passing through Serbia today, it is difficult to ignore the monumental industrial buildings that stand empty and often in ruins, and whose imposingness reminds of not so long ago, but very different times. The turbulent socio-economic processes that marked the end of the 20th century in Serbia led to a kind of alienation of the population from industry and industrial areas, which once shaped the specific cultural and spatial identity of local areas. Instead of these spaces being recognized for their historical and cultural significance, they mostly remain passive and neglected elements of urban and regional space. The key problems of preserving industrial heritage in Serbia relate primarily to the lack of functional valorization and the absence of clear revitalization strategies (Ćopić et al., 2014). As a result, abandoned factories, mining complexes and accompanying buildings usually do not have a new purpose, which leads to their physical deterioration and loss of cultural values (Stojanović & Janjušević, 2018). Zaječar is a typical example of a town in Serbia that, due to the process of deindustrialization, lost part of its identity, primarily built on the foundations of industry (Bugarin et al., 2024). Its numerous industrial facilities, complexes and supporting infrastructure have been abandoned or have lost their original production function, which is why today they largely remain outside the contemporary development trends (Stojanović & Janjušević, 2018).

Taking into account that industrial heritage includes tangible and intangible remains of

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the industrial past that are valued as cultural resources, tourism can be seen as an instrument of their protection, revitalization and reintegration into contemporary social and development trends, thus contributing to the preservation of historical identity and promotion of local communities (Berkenbosch et al., 2022). Industrial heritage has a significant role in the development of cultural tourism, but also other forms of tourism based on the principles of sustainability, since the existing spaces and infrastructure enable the creation of new contents without additional spatial burden. Thus, a balance is achieved between the preservation of cultural values, economic benefits and social inclusion of the local population (Nocca et al., 2024). The revitalization of industrial spaces could represent an important instrument for the economic and demographic recovery of cities like Zaječar, which have been affected by a long-term decrease in industrial production. Through the revitalization of these buildings, the existing spaces would not only be preserved from further deterioration, but would also acquire a new function and contribute to the creation of new jobs for the local population.

Empirical research so far has mostly focused on examples of successful revitalization of industrial heritage in developed European countries, while post-industrial cities in peripheral and post-socialist contexts have been considered much less frequently (Jones & Zhang, 2024; Harfst et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2020). This pattern is especially evident in studies conducted in Serbia, whose focus was mainly on larger urban centers, such as Belgrade and Novi Sad (Pavlović et al., 2023; Stojanović & Janjušević, 2018). Although some authors point to the potential of industrial heritage in Serbia, those studies are mostly fragmented and rarely offer a complete analysis of specific industrial complexes in the context of the development of sustainable tourism at the local level (Bugarin et al., 2021; Gluščević, 2024; Šicar, 2021). Therefore, it remains insufficiently clarified how industrial spaces in cities like Zaječar can be transformed into sustainable tourist resources. Accordingly, the question arises as to whether there are industrial spaces in Zaječar that can be revitalized and integrated into the tourist offer of the city, as well as in what condition they are today and in what way they could be functionally valorized. Therefore, the goal of this research is to examine the potential of the industrial heritage of the city of Zaječar as a resource for the sustainable development of tourism, through the analysis of the historical, spatial and symbolic characteristics of selected inactive industrial complexes, as well as the possibilities of their revitalization and functional integration into the modern tourist offer of the city.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Industrial heritage includes tangible and intangible remains of the industrial past that have historical, social, technological, architectural and scientific value and significance (Andrade et al., 2024). Industrial heritage includes industrial buildings, production halls, mines, machines, technologies and infrastructure, as well as intangible elements such as knowledge, work processes, traditions and lifestyles of communities formed around industrial production. In this sense, industrial heritage represents a significant testimony of the technological, economic and social development of a certain space and historical period, and it can also be seen as a specific form of cultural heritage (Szromek et al., 2021; Yao, 2021; Pivac et al., 2016). Today, the importance of industrial heritage lies not only in its historical, scientific and aesthetic value, but also in the possibilities of its use for economic and educational purposes, as well as in its role in shaping the collective memory, local and urban identity of the communities in which it was created (Yao, 2021).

In the context of structural changes that affected the national economies of numerous countries, industrial production gradually lost its developmental role, as a result of which a significant part of the industrial heritage was left without its original function, which was

manifested through the process of deindustrialization. Deindustrialization is reflected in the reduction of the share of industrial production in the gross domestic product, as well as the decline of employment in the industrial sector, with its causes and consequences varying depending on the level of economic development of a particular country. As a consequence of this process, in many post-industrial and transition regions there is the closing of industrial plants and the loss of jobs in the production sector, which caused the appearance of abandoned industrial spaces (Kakarlapudi et al., 2020). In Europe, the process of deindustrialization, which caused the closure of numerous coal mines and other industrial facilities, stimulated the need to find new models of its economic valorization and improvement of the image of these areas (Harfst et al., 2025). The primary challenge that in many cases makes it difficult or impossible to realize these processes lies precisely in the market logic that initially led to the shutdown of industrial facilities, and which still today gives priority to the economic value of space in relation to its cultural value. The restoration of the industrial heritage is often a complex process that requires significant financial resources, specific materials and professional staff, whereby the buildings are often difficult to adapt to modern construction standards. Therefore, in the perception of investors, they are often considered unprofitable, and are often left abandoned for a long time and left to decay, in order to create justified reasons for their demolition and use of space for other purposes. Urban expansion, together with an increased demand for housing and other related amenities, often encourages this process, to replace dilapidated and abandoned industrial heritage with profitable residential blocks and other commercial amenities. Therefore, there is a need to apply practical and proactive strategies to preserve industrial heritage, among which heritage revitalization is recognized as one of the most suitable approaches (Savoie et al., 2025).

The revitalization of industrial heritage represents the process of restoration and reactivation of industrial facilities and locations whose original function has ceased, whereby they can be adapted to new social, cultural, tourist or economic roles, while simultaneously preserving their values and preventing the degradation of material traces of the industrial past (Stojanović & Janjušević, 2018; Pivac et al., 2022). At its core, revitalization is an interdisciplinary field that draws on conservation, spatial planning, social sciences, and economics. Therefore, contemporary literature sees it as a multidimensional practice that generates cultural, social and economic values, and encourages the development of creative activities, tourism and the creation of new jobs. In contemporary literature, revitalization is viewed as a broader theoretical framework, whereby adaptive reuse is singled out as one of its key operational approaches. Adaptive reuse does not only mean the preservation of industrial heritage, but also aims to extend its lifespan through active integration into contemporary social and economic flows (Jagodič & Petek, 2025). This approach is based on the fact that the industrial heritage has development potential and can maintain its relevance for future generations, through finding new functions that correspond to contemporary social needs, while at the same time preserving its historical and architectural values. Adaptive reuse offers an alternative to demolition and new construction, activities that entail significant spatial, environmental and social costs. Extending the life cycle of existing facilities reduces the need and for new construction materials, as well as the amount of construction waste, while simultaneously preserving the spatial, historical and symbolic values of this heritage. In addition to ecological effects, this approach contributes to the preservation of collective memory and local identity, as well as to the reuse of neglected parts of the city, which gives this approach wider social and urban significance (Savoie et al., 2025).

In contemporary literature, adaptive reuse is linked to the concept of sustainable development, since this approach to the preservation of industrial heritage enables the

realization of the economic, social and ecological dimensions of sustainability (Jagodič & Petek, 2025). The economic dimension refers to long-term financial success and the creation of additional value through more efficient operations and rational use of resources, whereby sustainable development does not mean profit at all costs, but balanced and responsible growth. The social dimension of sustainability emphasizes the impact of development processes on local communities and the quality of life of the population, particularly including issues of safety and health, as well as the provision of opportunities and benefits to individuals and social groups who are in a disadvantageous position. The last dimension, the ecological dimension of sustainability, is aimed at reducing negative impacts on the environment through more rational use of resources, limiting waste and emissions, reducing risks to human health, as well as the gradual application of renewable and environmentally friendly materials (Muthu, 2020). In addition to the various possibilities of applying the adaptive reuse approach, tourism stands out as a special mechanism that, through the preservation of cultural values, the creation of economic benefits and the strengthening of local communities, enables the establishment of a link between industrial heritage and the principles of sustainable development. In this sense, tourism represents one of the specific areas in which the principles of sustainable development can be applied through this approach to industrial heritage (Ma et al., 2025).

The tourism sector has recognized the industrial heritage as a potential tourism product, the valorization of which can contribute to the creation of new jobs, economic development and retention of the young population in the destinations where it is located (Harfst et al., 2025). On the foundations of industrial heritage, industrial tourism was formed as a specific form of cultural tourism, which enables tourists to gain insight into the history of production, work and economic development of different areas and communities through visits to industrial sites (Vargas-Sánchez, 2015). This form of tourism can also be seen as a form of experience tourism, since it implies the active participation of tourists in getting to know industrial spaces and production processes (Guerra et al., 2022). Industrial tourism becomes an important tool for strengthening the identity of local communities, because it enables the observation of their historical development through the analysis of technological processes, forms of work and socio-economic changes that accompanied industrial development (Guerra et al., 2022). That is why it particularly attracts tourists who are looking for new experiences and show an interest in technology, as well as in the social and economic past of the area they visit (Vargas-Sánchez, 2015).

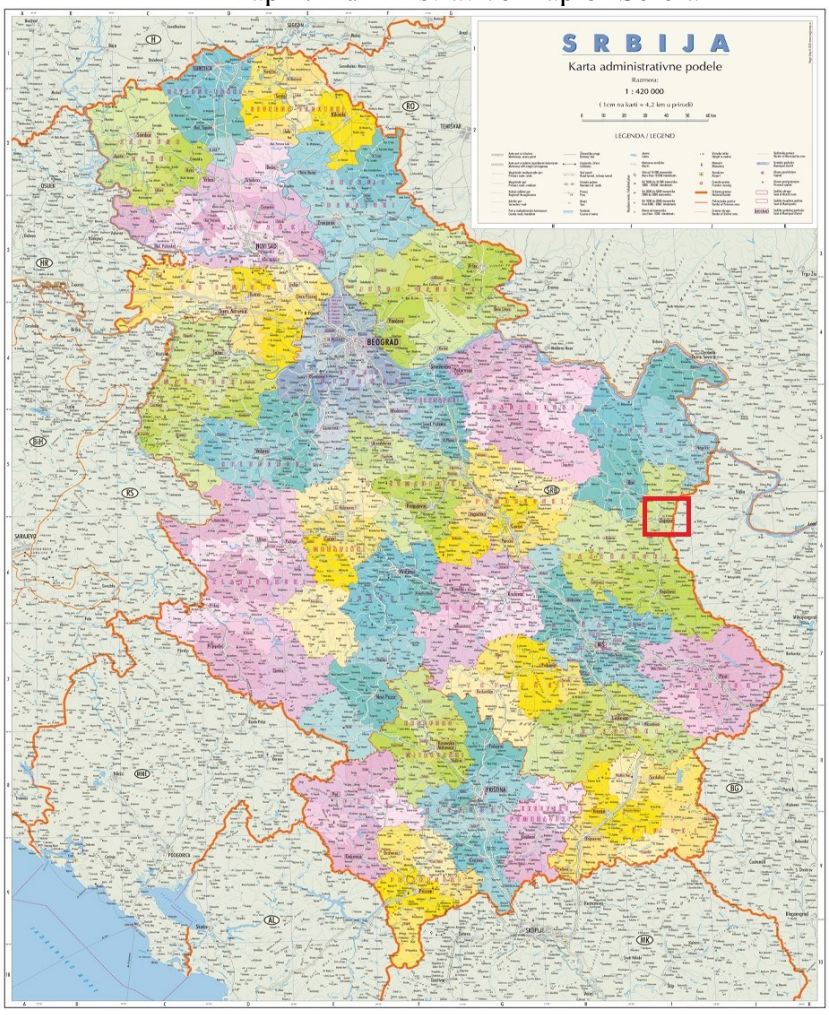
Today, industrial heritage is gaining more and more importance as a resource for sustainable development, where its value is realized through revitalization processes and the application of the adaptive reuse approach. Tourism is then singled out as an area in which the principles of sustainable development can be directly applied, while at the same time preserving local identity and reincorporating neglected areas into urban life (Jagodič & Petek, 2025). Although contemporary literature recognizes the potential of industrial heritage in tourism development, the way of its revitalization largely depends on the specific characteristics of the environment in which it is located. Therefore, there is a need for research that enables a deeper understanding of the possibilities and limitations of industrial heritage revitalization in different local environments.

STUDY AREA AND CASE STUDY CONTEXT

Located in the eastern part of Serbia, in the center of Timočka Krajina, the town of Zaječar was mentioned as early as 1466 as a small, rural settlement, which, due to its favorable geographical position, was chosen in 1833 to be the economic, religious, military and educational center of eastern Serbia. The former village managed to grow into an urban

settlement by the first half of the 19th century, and in the period after the Second World War it experienced its highest rate of growth and development. Industrial production then becomes the foundation of regional development and employment, while factories outgrow workplaces and become an integral part of the city's identity, shaping its everyday life and social life. Industrial expansion enabled the inhabitants to enjoy regular employment and social security, and to lead a lifestyle characteristic of the middle class (Krstić, 2015). The period of stability lasted until the nineties of the last century, when the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, as well as the accompanying war destruction and deep economic crisis, began the transition from socialism to liberal capitalism, which led to the decline of industrial production and the impoverishment of the population (Krstić, 2015). Today, Zaječar is the urban and administrative center of the Zaječar administrative district, with a little over 46 thousand inhabitants (Vesković & Onjia, 2025). The most important objects of industrial heritage are the crystal factory "Kristal" and the porcelain factory "Porcelan".

Map 1. Administrative map of Serbia



Source: https://www.magicmap.rs/sr/shop/administrativna-karta-srbije/ (Scale 1:420000)

Former Glass Factory "Kristal"

Quartz sand of exceptional quality obtained from the mine in Rgotina encouraged the opening of the first glass factory in Zaječar back in 1923. This factory was the first of its kind

in this part of Europe, however, it failed to survive due to the pressure of competitors from Belgium and the Czech Republic, and soon ceased operations in 1930. The "Kristal" glass factory represented in fact the second attempt to establish glass production in this city. It started its work in 1965 and, orienting itself towards Western Europe, it has largely changed its approach to business. After the education of workers in what was then West Germany, in 1974 she started the production of crystals that had a Western European design, high quality, and affordable prices. This made her products very popular and in demand, and they were exported not only to European countries, but also to America and the former Soviet Union (Skver Magazin, n.d.). As a result, Crystal became one of the most important industrial plants in Eastern Serbia in the second half of the 20th century, as well as a key driver of the economic development not only of Zaječar, but of the entire Timočka Krajina. In its heyday, this factory employed more than six people and produced over 90% of crystal glass in the former Yugoslavia (Stuparušić, 2022). Although in the available literature there are no precise data on the spatial capacities it had at its disposal, it can be assumed that they exceeded 9,000 m², since the factory developed within the space of the initial glass factory whose capacities were of that volume. The Kristal factory ceased operations in 1990 due to the political circumstances that befell Serbia at the time (Skver Magazin, n.d.). Today, the production facilities of this factory are completely empty, and its bare walls stand as a reminder of the former glorious times (Image 1) (Glas Zaječara, 2019).

Figure 1. Visual representation of the abandoned production facilities of the "Kristal" glass factory in Zaječar

Source: Radio Magnum, 2023

Former Porcelain Factory "Porcelan"

The need to build a porcelain factory in Zaječar arose in the context of post-war shortages and the interruption of international cooperation, which led to a shortage of ceramic tiles. Namely, this shortage came to the fore during the renovation and modernization of the public bathroom of the "7. Septembar" brewery, which prompted the manager at the time, Stojan Stojanović, to consider the possibility of their local production. Stojanović, without any prior knowledge, relying on available literature, local raw materials and numerous experiments, develops a system for the production of tiles, and having received institutional support, decides to open a porcelain factory in Zaječar in the early fifties of the last century (1 Square Magazine, n.d.). The factory operated successfully, and in 1967 a decision was made to improve its products, as well as the range of offers, in order to achieve a wider market orientation. Entering into cooperation with scientific and research institutions from Belgrade and Ljubljana, the

porcelain factory managed to modernize its offer and improve its visual identity. Thanks to that, in 1967 alone, they hired 150 new workers, increased production by 50%, and started exporting to Sweden, West Germany and Austria (2 Square Magazine, n.d.). The factory was not only a key actor in the industrial and economic development of Zaječar, but also shaped the social life of the local community, providing stable employment and other benefits for the local population (Danas, 2020). The processes of economic crisis, sanctions and transition during the nineties of the last century led to the deterioration of business, and to the final declaration of bankruptcy of the factory in 2010 (Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Serbia, 2012). Today, this factory is in bankruptcy proceedings and although its physical remains are partially degraded, its products, as well as the memories of former workers, remain part of the permanent, intangible industrial heritage of the city (Danas, 2020).

Figure 2. Visual representation of the work procedure in the former "Porcelan" factory

Source: Upoznaj Zaječar, n.d.

METHODOLOGY

As a prerequisite for the transformation of neglected and abandoned industrial complexes into tourist resources based on their heritage, a preliminary analysis of their history, spatial structure, symbolic meaning and potential for adaptation is necessary. Therefore, a qualitative methodological approach was applied in this research, with the use of the case study method to analyze the potential of industrial heritage as a resource for sustainable tourism development. This approach was chosen because it allows for a thorough, context-sensitive analysis of complex socio-spatial phenomena in their actual environment.

Taking into account the rich industrial heritage of Zaječar, a clearly defined set of criteria was applied for the selection of former industrial complexes most suitable for tourism revitalization. First of all, the selected complexes had to play a significant role in the industrial and socio-economic development of the city during the second half of the 20th century. Their production should be based on products that have cultural and craft value. Also, it was necessary for them to be out of service for more than two decades, to be located within the urban structure of Zaječar, and to have existing physical characteristics that enable their revitalization, adaptation and potential inclusion in the tourism sector. Applying the aforementioned criteria, two former industrial complexes were singled out: the former "Kristal" glass factory and the "Porcelan" factory.

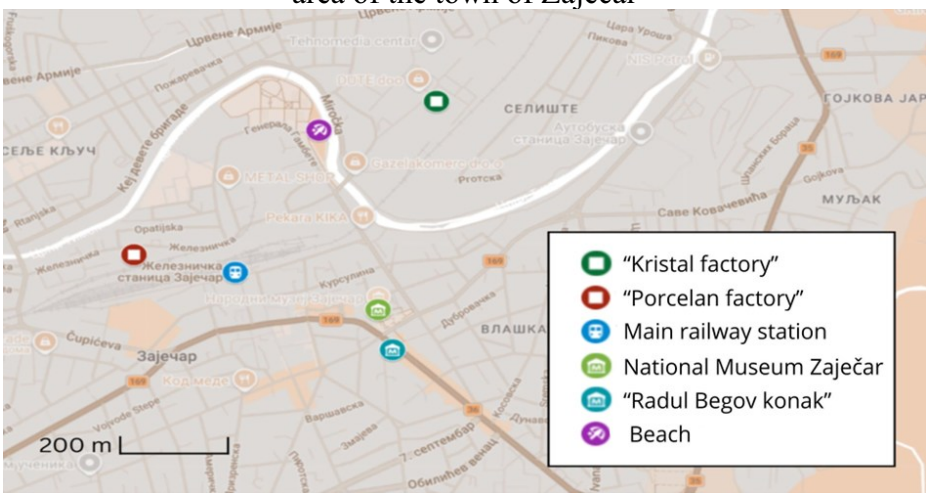
The limited archival and statistical documentation about these complexes meant that the research was based on secondary sources, primarily on publications in the local media. In addition to these data, field observations were conducted, and visual documentation was used to present the current state and spatial characteristics of the site. The collected material was analyzed in order to assess the historical significance of the complex, their current physical

condition and potential contribution to the development of tourism, which served as a basis for proposing realistic revitalization solutions aligned with the principles of sustainable tourism.

RESULTS

Considering the spatial distribution of the former glass factory "Kristal" and the porcelain factory "Porcelan" (Figure 3), it can be seen that both industrial complexes are located in the wider central area of Zaječar, with most of the city's key facilities and attractions being located at a distance of approximately 1.5 km from both locations. The "Crystal" factory is about 1.1 km from the city center, while the "Porcelan" factory is located at a distance of about 1.3 km. Although "Porcelan" is somewhat further from the city center, its position can be considered spatially favorable, given that it is located in the immediate vicinity of the main railway station. Taken together, these two industrial complexes are about 1.2 km apart, which indicates their good spatial connection within the city.

Map 2. Spatial distribution of the former industrial complexes "Kristal" and "Porcelan" in the area of the town of Zaječar



Source: Authors, based on Google Maps imagery (© Google, 2026)

Analysis of the current state of the former glass factory "Kristal"

By examining the current state of the former glass factory "Kristal" (Figure 4), it was determined that this industrial complex is now completely abandoned and does not perform any production, economic or other function. The factory space is without constant supervision and maintenance, which over time has led to pronounced physical degradation of the facilities. The load-bearing structure of the former industrial plant has basically been preserved, while the production halls are now empty and completely devoid of equipment and machines that once formed the basis of the production process. Inside the complex, the remains of various materials, powdery deposits and rubble can be seen on the ground, the origin and composition of which have not been precisely determined. Their presence indicates the need for a more detailed analysis of the terrain, especially considering that it is an area of former industrial production. In addition to the possible remains of industrial activities, additional attention in the future stages of revitalization should be paid to the evaluation of the quality of the soil and the conditions for safe use of the space. An additional problem is the poor physical condition of the buildings, which is a consequence of long-term non-maintenance and exposure to external influences.

Figure 3. Presentation of the current state of the "Kristal" factory

Source: Serbia Film Commission

Some parts of the complex are now significantly dilapidated, where rusty pipes, damaged structural elements and unstable parts of the building can pose a potential danger of collapse. These processes were additionally accelerated by the fact that in several places the windows were damaged or completely broken, which led to leakage and direct exposure of the interior spaces to atmospheric influences, and therefore to accelerated deterioration of materials and construction. Although there are no precise and official data on the total area of the complex, it can be assumed that it is an area larger than 9,000 m², bearing in mind that the factory was built on the foundations of a former glass factory whose spatial capacities were of that volume. Despite the pronounced neglect and visible signs of deterioration, the buildings were mostly built of solid materials, primarily red brick and massive structural elements, which indicates the existence of a certain constructive potential for their restoration and adaptation to new uses, with prior rehabilitation and stabilization of the space.

Figure 4. View of the interior of the "Kristal" factory

Source: Serbia Film Commission

Analysis of the current state of the former porcelain factory "Porcelan"

By examining the current state of the porcelain factory "Porcelan" (Figure 5), it was determined that this industrial complex is officially in bankruptcy proceedings today, which confirms that production is no longer active, nor does the factory function as a business entity. During the second decade of the 21st century, the process of selling the movable assets of the factory began, with the aim of collecting claims against the state and other creditors, whereby a significant part of the equipment and property was sold off during that period. These processes further contributed to the loss of the production function of the factory and its gradual shutdown as an industrial system. During the bankruptcy proceedings, there were also changes in the ownership structure of part of the complex. According to the available data, around 2011, the Slovenian company Gorenje bought one of the larger production halls, as well as part of the

property from the former location of the "Porcelan" factory in Zaječar. This development of events indicates that today the premises and facilities of this industrial complex are not fully owned by the original company, but are fragmented between different legal entities, which further complicates the overall assessment and management of this space.

Figure 5. Presentation of the current state of the "Porcelan" factory

Source: Google Maps imagery (© Google, 2026)

From the spatial aspect, the porcelain factory is located right next to the road, which makes it easily accessible and visible in the urban area of the city. Access to the complex itself is not strictly controlled, since there is only a low fence that can be easily crossed, which allows unhindered entry to the factory premises. Although this degree of accessibility does not imply an organized or safe use of the space, it indicates the openness and exposure of the complex, but also the absence of systematic supervision and protection of the facilities. Observing the physical condition of the factory, it can be seen that it is in a slightly better state of preservation, especially when it comes to the exterior of the buildings. The factory, like Kristal, is built predominantly of red brick and solid structural materials, which contributes to its visual stability and legibility of industrial architecture. However, despite the relatively better external appearance, there are similar problems characteristic of abandoned industrial buildings, such as broken or damaged windows, through which leaks occur and the gradual deterioration of the interior spaces. An additional specificity of the "Porcelan" factory is the fact that the entire complex is oriented along the road, which gives it a pronounced linear structure and high visibility in space. This spatial position, in combination with accessibility and relatively preserved construction, indicates that the factory has certain physical and spatial characteristics that could enable its reuse, with prior rehabilitation and adaptation to new purposes.

Figure 6. View of one of the entrances of the "Porcelan" factory

Source: Google Maps imagery (© Google, 2026)

Intangible heritage of the former "Kristal" and "Porcelan" factories

In addition to the material remains of industrial complexes, a significant part of the legacy of the former "Crystal" and "Porcelan" factories is also their intangible dimension, which is still present today in the collective memory of the local community, museum practices and modern initiatives aimed at preserving industrial heritage. This dimension includes knowledge, skills, work practices, employee memories and social customs associated with products that have shaped everyday life in Zaječar for decades.

The "Kristal" glass factory was one of the most important industrial plants in the city, especially during the seventies and eighties of the 20th century, when more than 3,000 workers from Zaječar and surrounding towns worked there. In addition to the central plant in Zaječar, the factory also had plants in Preševo, Kladovo and Sokobanja. Special value was represented by expert personnel and craftsmen specialized in glass processing, among whom the glassblowers stood out in particular. Some of the workers graduated from specialized glassmaking schools, including educational institutions outside of Serbia, such as the school in Rogaška Slatina in Slovenia. The knowledge and skills related to crystal production, as well as the work culture that developed in the factory, today represent an important segment of the intangible industrial heritage of the city.

Figure 7. Glass blowers

Source: Skver Magazin

The products of the "Kristal" factory were recognizable for their quality and aesthetic value and were an integral part of everyday and festive culture. Crystalware from Zaječar was often given as gifts during weddings, family celebrations and other festive events, while in many households it was used as a representative part of the family inventory. Today, these objects can be found in private family collections, but also in museum collections, especially in the ethnographic collection of the National Museum in Zaječar. Museum presentations, exhibitions and documentation projects contribute to the preservation of the memory of the factory, emphasizing not only the products, but also the stories of work, production processes and the social context in which the factory operated. Additionally, local media and digital platforms contribute to the preservation of collective memory through the publication of photos, texts and testimonies of former workers and citizens.

Figure 8. Crystal in display cases

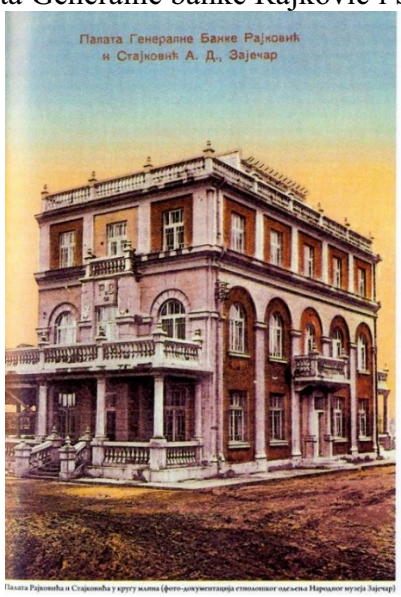
Source: Zaječar National Museum - exhibition "Presence: Crystal Zaječar".

The Industrial Ceramic Company, later known as the porcelain factory "Porcelan", had a similar importance in the industrial development of Zaječar. The company began operations in 1950 and soon became one of the largest industrial plants in the city, especially after the connection with the non-metal mines and the formation of the Zaječar Non-Metal Industry (Savić, 1977). The products of the porcelain factory are still present in many households today, where they are used both in everyday meals and on festive occasions, reminding of the wide range of products and the importance that this factory had in the local economy.

During the eighties of the 20th century, factory workers built a new porcelain factory at the exit of the city towards Negotin with their own funds. As part of production, art and design facilities were developed, where new models and decorative solutions were created, including products decorated with stickers and hand-painted porcelain objects. This type of work organization contributed to the development of creative and artistic aspects of industrial production, which today represent an important part of the factory's intangible heritage.

The old administrative building of the porcelain factory, the former Palace of the General Bank Rajković i Stajković A.D., which in the period between the two world wars was one of the most beautiful buildings in Zaječar and today is under state protection, has additional cultural and historical value. Photos of this object are kept in the photo-documentation of the Ethnological Department of the National Museum in Zaječар, which additionally documents the history of the industrial development of the town.

Figure 9. Palata Generalne banke Rajković i Stajković A.D.



Source: Zaječar National Museum, photo-documentation of the Ethnological Department.

Memories of work and life in the "Kristal" and "Porcelan" factories are still present among former workers and residents of Zaječar. Their personal experiences, stories and testimonies represent an important source for understanding everyday life in an industrial environment and contribute to preserving the collective identity of the city. Through such testimonies, industrial heritage goes beyond the boundaries of physical objects and becomes part of the broader cultural and social memory of the local community.

The "Kristal" and "Porcelan" factories therefore represent not only former industrial facilities, but also important carriers of knowledge, work culture and urban identity of Zaječar, whose importance is recognized today in the context of preservation and interpretation of industrial heritage.

Table 1. Comparative view of the factories "Kristal" and "Porcelan"

"Kristal" glass factory	Porcelain Factory "Porcelan"
➢ Wider central area of Zajecar ➢ Distance from the center: ~1.1 km ➢ No supervision and maintenance ➢ Completely abandoned, without production function ➢ Physical condition: pronounced degradation, empty halls ➢ Construction: red brick, massive elements ➢ Damage: broken windows, leaks, rusty pipes, unstable parts ➢ Area: >9,000 m² (assumed) ➢ Intangible heritage: knowledge and skills of glass production, glass blowing, work practices ➢ Museum and public presentation: exhibitions, documentation projects, digitization of photographs ➢ Significance: synonymous with quality and aesthetic value, present throughout the country ➢ Cultural role: part of family rituals, gifts, festivities ➢ Symbolic significance: an expressed symbol of the urban identity of Zaječar ➢ Potential for revitalization: constructive potential with rehabilitation	➢ Wider central area of Zajecar ➢ Distance from the center: ~1.3 km ➢ Easily accessible, low fence, next to the road ➢ In the bankruptcy proceedings, the production was shut down, the property was partially sold off ➢ Relatively better preserved exterior ➢ Construction: red brick, solid structural materials ➢ Damages: broken windows, leaks ➢ Surface: not specified ➢ Intangible heritage: working practices and knowledge related to porcelain production ➢ Museum/public interpretation: preserved products and public interpretations ➢ Significance: less emphasized ➢ Cultural role: shaped work habits and industrial identity ➢ Symbolic importance: part of the urban identity of the city ➢ Potential for revitalization: good location, visibility, relatively preserved structure

Source: Authors

DISCUSSION

The former glass factory "Kristal" and the porcelain factory "Porcelan" are located in the narrow urban core of Zaječar, in very favorable locations. Thanks to such spatial location, these objects are well connected to the city structure and easily accessible, which makes them suitable for the adaptive reuse process. In order to successfully transform the industrial heritage into objects integrated into the city's tourist offer and the local identity of the community, it is necessary that they be easily accessible both to tourists and to the local population (Herman, 2023). Empirical research so far indicates that the favorable spatial location of key services and contents contributes to their greater involvement in daily life flows, especially when their use does not involve long journeys (Abdelfattah et al., 2022; Ferrer-Ortiz et al., 2022). In this context, in the case of areas with cultural and touristic importance, the location is an important factor that affects the decision to visit, and therefore the degree of their popularity and inclusion in the tourist offer (Herman, 2023). Thanks to the proximity of the city center, good traffic connections and mutual spatial proximity, these objects have a strong potential for integration into the urban space, and through the process of adaptive reuse, they could acquire a new, mainly cultural and touristic function.

The current physical condition of the industrial buildings of the "Kristal" and "Porcelan" factories is the result of long-term neglect, as a result of which these spaces were left without an active purpose and left to decay. However, this situation cannot be interpreted exclusively through the prism of the age of the buildings or their long-term non-use, but primarily as a result of a wider set of socio-economic and institutional changes characteristic of the post-socialist context. The problems in the operations of these companies, which ultimately led to the termination of their production function, appeared during the last decade of the 20th century, during the period of intense social and economic transformations in Serbia. Similar processes were also recorded in other post-socialist countries, where numerous industrial complexes, due to deindustrialization, were left without their primary purpose, but also without clearly defined strategies and plans for their further use (Milojković et al., 2017; Oglethorpe et al., 2024). In such circumstances, industrial heritage is often perceived as a development challenge, bearing in mind that its adaptation and reuse require significant financial investments. The dominance of short-term market logic in these processes has led to the simplest and seemingly most profitable approach imposing the abandonment of buildings to further degradation, until the moment when their demolition becomes justified, and space is freed for new forms of construction (Savoie et al., 2025). Exactly this pattern can be recognized in the case of both considered industrial plants.

Currently, there are no clearly defined and publicly presented plans for the systematic revitalization of the premises of the former "Kristal" and "Porcelan" factories, although certain facilities are occasionally used for various production and creative purposes. The abandoned industrial environment of the "Kristal" factory is recognized as an authentic scenographic location, which is why the space is occasionally used for filming film and television projects, as well as other audiovisual content. Although this kind of temporary use does not represent a long-term revitalization solution, it indicates the potential of these spaces to attract the attention of creative industries and to be included in contemporary cultural and tourist flows. In European practice, similar industrial sites often became the starting point for a wider regeneration of space, where the initial cultural and creative activities represented the first step towards their systematic transformation (Ferrilli et al., 2024). In this sense, the industrial heritage of Zaječar can be seen as a resource with multiple possibilities of adaptive reuse, including the development of interpretation centers dedicated to industrial history, creative and educational spaces, as well as locations for cultural events and thematic tourist manifestations (Balázs,

Herman & Naramski, 2021; Vardopoulos & Theodoropoulou, 2022). Examples from European practice show that such an approach enables the preservation of tangible and intangible industrial heritage, while at the same time encouraging the development of new cultural contents and sustainable forms of tourism that contribute to the strengthening of local identity and the economic development of the community (Szromek et al., 2021). In this context, the former factories "Crystal" and "Porcelan" can be seen not only as abandoned industrial spaces, but also as potential points of future urban regeneration and development of thematically oriented industrial tourism in Zaječar.

Despite the current state of neglect, the "Crystal" and "Porcelan" factories are characterized by quality construction and the use of durable materials, which indicates the significant constructive potential of these buildings. Although their revitalization undoubtedly requires significant financial resources and employment of labor, from the aspect of environmental protection and the interests of the local community, it can be seen as a more favorable solution compared to alternative forms of intervention. Given that various chemicals and potentially harmful substances were used in the production processes of these factories, the application of the adaptive reuse approach would enable their systematic and safe removal, which would reduce the risk of soil, water resources and wider environment pollution, which would exist in case of uncontrolled demolition of buildings. Additionally, this approach contributes to reducing the amount of construction waste, extending the life of existing structures and more rational use of spatial resources, in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. The inclusion of the local community in the renovation process, in accordance with the principles of sustainability and adaptive reuse approach, would enable the development of space and content adapted to the real needs and characteristics of the local context. This would further strengthen the sense of local identity and belonging, as well as facilitate the integration of these facilities into the social life and tourist flows of the city. In this way, the industrial heritage would not represent a passive remnant of the past, but an active resource for economic, social and tourist development.

Intangible industrial heritage can represent a key resource not only for the revitalization of the "Kristal" and "Porcelan" factories, but also for their meaningful inclusion in modern tourist flows. In environments like this, the interpretation of the industrial past does not rely solely on the degree of preservation of material structures, but also on the capacity of the community to convey that past through stories, memories, knowledge and symbolic references preserved in collective memory. In this context, intangible heritage should not be seen as a supplement to the material elements of the industrial space, but as an equal and often crucial element of modern approaches to industrial tourism, especially in situations where the complete physical restoration of the facilities is currently not feasible (Guerra et al., 2022). It is the immaterial layer that enables the reinterpretation and preservation of the meaning of industrial spaces even when their material basis is damaged. Given that there are currently no clearly defined plans for the revitalization of these areas, the activation of intangible heritage can be an initial mechanism for re-examining their role in local identity, but also for stimulating the interest and engagement of key actors in the direction of their future revitalization. In this way, intangible heritage becomes the starting point of the process that precedes concrete spatial and investment interventions. However, the potential of this approach is limited by the structural challenges accompanying the revitalization of industrial heritage in a post-socialist context. One of the key problems is reflected in the fragmented ownership of industrial complexes, divided between several actors, which significantly complicates decision-making, intervention planning and the implementation of integrated revitalization projects. This situation is particularly pronounced in the case of the "Porcelan" porcelain factory, where bankruptcy

processes and divided ownership slowed down the possibility of a systematic approach to the renovation and reuse of space. The common problem of both industrial complexes is reflected in the absence of a long-term and coordinated revitalization strategy that would recognize the industrial heritage as a development resource and not as a burden of the past. In the absence of clearly defined institutional frameworks, intersectoral cooperation and strategic planning, the revitalization of industrial heritage in post-socialist cities is reduced to fragmented and sporadic interventions, without significant impact on urban and regional development (Savoie et al., 2025).

The findings of this research indicate that the potential of Zaječar's industrial heritage does not derive exclusively from its physical renewal, but is primarily reflected in the possibility of its functional and symbolic reintegration into the contemporary development trends of the city. Such an approach does not imply the development of mass tourism, but opens up space for the creation of thematically oriented and experientially based contents that rely on the authenticity of the space, local narratives and the industrial story, which achieves the differentiation of the destination without disrupting its urban and social fabric. The intangible dimensions of the industrial heritage additionally enable the active involvement of the local community in the processes of its evaluation and reinterpretation, thus encouraging the development of a sustainable tourist product harmonized with the local identity and daily life of the inhabitants (Szromek et al., 2021). In the post-socialist context, this approach opens up the possibility of a gradual development of industrial tourism based on existing resources and local values, whereby the industrial heritage is recognized as a long-term potential for sustainable urban, cultural and tourist development.

CONCLUSIONS

This research examined the potential of the industrial heritage of the city of Zaječar as a resource for sustainable tourism development, with a special focus on the former industrial complexes of the glass factory "Kristal" and the porcelain factory "Porcelan". Starting from modern theoretical approaches to industrial heritage, revitalization and adaptive reuse concept, the paper pointed out the possibilities of transforming neglected industrial spaces into functional, culturally and socially relevant segments of modern urban and touristic development.

The analysis of the historical, spatial and symbolic characteristics of both industrial complexes showed that "Crystal" and "Porcelan" represent significant carriers of the industrial identity of Zaječar, whose role in the development of the city during the second half of the 20th century went beyond the purely economic function. Although today both complexes are in a state of disrepair and without an active purpose, their favorable spatial position in the urban fabric of the city, high-quality industrial architecture and the presence of a strong intangible heritage indicate the existence of a real potential for their revitalization and reintegration into modern development flows.

The research results confirm that the physical deterioration of industrial facilities in Zaječar is not a consequence of their inherent inadequacy or spatial disadvantage, but primarily the result of a long-term absence of systemic strategies and institutional support in the post-socialist context. In this sense, industrial heritage cannot be seen exclusively as a spatial or economic problem, but as a complex social and cultural resource whose valorization requires an integrated and long-term approach. The importance of the intangible industrial heritage is particularly emphasized, which is reflected in the collective memory, knowledge, work practices and symbolic meaning that these factories still have in the local community. It is this layer that represents the key basis for the interpretation of the industrial past and the

development of experience-based tourist content, even in conditions of limited physical renewal of the space.

The findings of the paper indicate that the potential of Zaječar's industrial heritage does not lie in the development of mass tourism, but in the formation of thematically oriented, authentic and sustainable tourist products that rely on local narratives, the industrial story and the identity of the city. Such an approach enables simultaneous preservation of cultural values, strengthening of local identity and gradual economic activation of neglected urban areas, without disrupting the social and spatial context of the city.

Although this research provides insight into the potential of Zaječar's industrial heritage as a resource for sustainable tourism development, it is necessary to point out certain limitations that affect the scope and depth of the conclusions drawn. First of all, the analysis is based on a qualitative approach and a case study, which implies a limited possibility of generalizing the findings to a wider set of post-industrial cities. An additional limitation refers to the lack of systematized archival and statistical documentation on the spatial, technical and economic characteristics of the analyzed industrial complexes, as a result of which the research largely relied on secondary sources, media records and field observations. This context conditioned the focus on an interpretive and analytical approach, while a quantitative assessment of the economic effects of potential revitalization, as well as a precise overview of costs and investment models, were not included in this work. Also, the perspectives of key stakeholders, such as former workers, local residents, decision makers and potential investors, were not systematically included in the research design, but were considered indirectly through available sources.

In accordance with the mentioned limitations, future research could be directed towards expanding the empirical framework through the inclusion of qualitative interviews and participatory methods, in order to take a closer look at the role of the local community and intangible heritage in the revitalization processes of industrial spaces. It would be especially important to carry out comparative analyzes of industrial heritage in other post-socialist cities of Serbia and the region, which would enable the identification of common patterns, but also contextually specific challenges and opportunities. Further research could be directed towards the development of operational models of phased revitalization, which would integrate the spatial-planning, economic and tourism dimensions of sustainable development, as well as towards examining the institutional and management frameworks necessary for the long-term valorization of industrial heritage. In this way, future research could contribute not only to the academic literature, but also to the practical shaping of strategies that recognize industrial heritage as an active resource of local and regional development.

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ORAL HERITAGE TOURISM AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INDIRECT SOCIAL PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS: A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Mihail Ciobanu[1]

ABSTRACT: *This paper conceptualizes Oral Heritage Tourism (OHT), the systematic integration of elderly storytellers and "living human treasures" into the tourism value chain, as an instrument of indirect social protection for vulnerable households in the Republic of Moldova. The objective is to develop a strategic framework that links active ageing and the silver economy with intangible cultural heritage safeguarding, demonstrating how narrative-based visitor experiences can generate non-transfer income streams for rural and low-pension households while strengthening social inclusion. Methodologically, the study employs a structured literature review on active ageing, narrative transportation, and participatory heritage mapping, combined with an applied strategic analysis that synthesizes international good practices (e.g., senior guide programs, living library formats, and digitally geo-tagged oral archives) and maps Moldova's regional narrative assets across the North, Center, South, Gagauzia, and the left bank of the Dniester. The results propose an actionable roadmap for 2026–2030 comprising (i) a national oral census and "oral cartography" inventory, (ii) a light-touch certification model for "Silver Storytellers", and (iii) product development through guesthouse storytelling sessions and multilingual digital story trails. The discussion highlights OHT's triple-bottom-line potential - economic supplementation, reduced isolation and enhanced well-being among older adults, and preservation of rapidly vanishing vernacular histories, while addressing risks of commodification and" fakelore". The paper concludes that embedding OHT into Moldova's tourism strategy can diversify rural livelihoods and reframe older adults from welfare recipients to custodians of cultural capital.*

KEYWORDS: *Oral Heritage Tourism; active ageing; intangible cultural heritage; rural tourism; Moldova.*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary tourism landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, shifting from the consumption of tangible assets - monuments, landscapes, and artifacts - to the engagement with intangible experiences, narratives, and human connections. Within this paradigm shift, the "Oral Heritage" of a destination emerges not merely as a supplementary feature of the visitor economy but as a central pillar of differentiation and authenticity. For the Republic of Moldova, a nation situated at the geopolitical and cultural crossroads of South-eastern Europe, the preservation and mobilization of oral traditions offer a unique strategic avenue for sustainable development.

In the paper we provide an analysis of "Oral Heritage Tourism", defined as the systematic integration of elderly storytellers, oral historians, and "Living Human Treasures" into the tourism value chain. It explores the intersection of the "Silver Economy" - the economic activities driven by the needs and assets of aging populations - and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). As Moldova grapples with demographic challenges, including rural depopulation and an aging workforce, the potential to transform the elderly from passive recipients of social welfare into active custodians of cultural capital represents a critical opportunity for national resilience.

The analysis is structured to provide a theoretical grounding in oral cartography and active aging, followed by an examination of international best practices. It then proceeds to a detailed "Oral Cartography" of Moldova's regions - North, Center, South, Gagauzia, and the Transnistrian region - identifying specific narrative assets and the elderly custodians who hold

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them. Finally, it proposes a strategic roadmap for integrating these assets into the National Tourism Development Strategy 2030, ensuring that the voices of the past become the drivers of the future visitor economy.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary design that combines conceptual analysis with applied territorial mapping. The methodological approach integrates four complementary components: (i) structured literature review, (ii) comparative analysis of international practices, (iii) oral cartography as a spatial-ethnographic tool, and (iv) strategic synthesis for policy and tourism product development. First, a structured review of academic and policy literature was conducted to establish the theoretical foundations linking active ageing, the silver economy, intangible cultural heritage (ICH), and storytelling within tourism studies. Second, a comparative analysis of international good practices was undertaken to identify transferable models of elderly participation in heritage interpretation. Case studies from Japan (Silver Human Resource Centers), the United Kingdom (Living Library and oral history interpretation), Italy and Germany (intangible heritage in rural development), and participatory oral mapping initiatives (e.g., StoryMaps and community cartography projects) were examined. These cases provided operational benchmarks for designing a Moldovan framework adapted to local demographic and institutional realities. Third, we employ the concept of "oral cartography" as an applied method for identifying and spatializing narrative assets. This method draws on participatory mapping principles in which local elders, librarians, teachers, and cultural mediators identify places associated with legends, historical memories, rituals, and traditional practices. The process involves (a) identifying key narrative locations, (b) associating them with custodians of memory, and (c) conceptual geo-referencing to illustrate how stories are anchored in territory. Although we provide a conceptual map rather than field-collected GIS data, the framework outlines how such mapping can be operationalized in practice. Finally, the findings from the literature review, case comparisons, and oral cartography are synthesized into a strategic roadmap for 2026–2030. This synthesis follows a policy-oriented analytical logic, identifying stages of implementation (inventory, capacity building, and product development) and linking them to potential institutional actors, including local authorities, cultural institutions, NGOs working with the elderly, and rural guesthouse networks. The replicable framework can guide future empirical implementation and pilot projects in Moldova's rural regions.

RESULTS

The demographic aging of the global population is frequently framed as a socioeconomic burden, particularly in Eastern Europe where migration patterns have accelerated the aging of rural communities. However, the concept of the "silver economy" reframes this demographic shift as an opportunity for innovation and economic growth. In the context of tourism, the silver economy manifests in two distinct dimensions: the elderly as consumers (silver tourists) and the elderly as producers (silver service providers) (Durai et al., 2025). Active aging, a policy framework championed by the World Health Organization and reflected in Moldova's national strategies, posits that optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security is essential for enhancing the quality of life as people age. Participation is not limited to labor market activity but extends to cultural, social, and civic engagement. Academic literature suggests that for the elderly, engaging in storytelling and heritage transmission serves as a powerful mechanism for "Ikigai" - a Japanese concept referring to a "reason for being" (Weiss et al., 2005). Research validates that participation in

tourism as guides or storytellers correlates with improved physical and cognitive health among the elderly. A study on Japan's Silver Human Resource Centers found that retirees engaged in community work, including tourism guidance, reported higher levels of well-being and lower mortality rates compared to their inactive peers (Weiss et al., 2005). Furthermore, the social interaction inherent in tourism combats isolation, a critical issue for the elderly in rural Moldova (UNDP, 2024). Thus, "Oral Heritage Tourism" is not strictly a commercial tourism product; it is a public health intervention and a social cohesion strategy wrapped in a visitor experience. The mechanism that transforms a physical location into a "place" imbued with meaning is storytelling. Place attachment theory suggests that emotional bonds between people and places are forged through the narratives associated with them (Yuxin et al., 2024). In heritage tourism, storytelling acts as the bridge between the tangible object (a ruin, a church, a landscape) and the intangible significance it holds for the community. Narrative Transportation Theory explains the psychological impact of this process. When a tourist listens to a compelling story, particularly one delivered by an authentic witness, they are "transported" into the narrative world. This state of immersion reduces counter-arguing (skepticism) and increases emotional connection (Solomon et al., 2026). For diasporic tourists - a key market for Moldova - storytelling is even more potent. It facilitates a "return to roots", merging personal identity with collective memory, often transforming a leisure trip into a pilgrimage of ancestry (Sustainability Directory, 2024a). The authenticity of the storyteller is paramount. In an era of digital ubiquity, tourists increasingly seek "existential authenticity" - encounters that feel unscripted and deeply human. An elderly storyteller, recounting a personal memory of a Soviet collective farm or a local legend passed down through three generations, offers a level of authenticity that a professional guide reading a script cannot replicate. This is the "intergenerational tourism ethic", where the value lies in the transfer of wisdom across age cohorts (Sustainability Directory, 2024b). To manage oral heritage effectively, it must first be identified and spatialized. "Oral cartography" is an emerging interdisciplinary methodology that integrates ethnography, geography, and oral history to map the invisible landscape of memory (La Frenierre, 2008). Unlike traditional topographic mapping, which prioritizes physical accuracy, oral cartography prioritizes the "lived experience" of the land. The process of creating an oral map involves "participatory mapping" (UNESCO, 2016). This bottom-up approach engages community members, specifically elders, to identify locations of significance that may not appear on official maps. The methodology typically follows a sequence: ground mapping by using raw materials or simple sketches to outline the community's mental map; transect walks on the land with elders, recording stories *in situ*; geo-referencing, thus anchoring these stories to GPS coordinates to create a digital layer of heritage (Caquard & Cartwright, 2014). This approach allows for the documentation of "mythological landscapes", where legends occurred, and "memoryscapes", where historical events were witnessed. For Moldova, where official history has often been rewritten by successive regimes, the oral map represents a "counter-archive", preserving the vernacular history of the people against the hegemonic history of the state.

Analyzing established models from diverse cultural contexts provides a blueprint for Moldova. There are a few case studies that demonstrate how oral heritage can be professionalized and integrated into regional development. Japan offers the most mature and institutionalized model for integrating the elderly into the tourism workforce. The Silver Human Resource Centers (SHRCs) are government-subsidized organizations found in nearly every municipality, designed to provide temporary, short-term, or light work for retirees (Weiss et al., 2005). Unlike volunteer associations, SHRCs operate as a labor pool. Retirees register as members and are contracted for specific tasks. In tourism-heavy prefectures like Kyoto,

Ishikawa, and Iwate, SHRCs provide "Goodwill Guides" and heritage preservation staff. SHRC members often specialize in niche local history. For example, at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Hiraizumi, elderly guides provide detailed narratives on the Pure Land gardens, drawing on local knowledge that encompasses not just the 12th-century history but the community's centuries-long stewardship of the site (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2026). The guides are paid a modest fee, supplementing their pensions. This financial transaction, however small, dignifies the labor and ensures reliability, distinguishing it from casual volunteering. Longitudinal studies confirm that SHRC participants maintain higher functional capacity and mental health than non-participants, validating the "active aging" hypothesis (Weiss et al., 2005). Moldova's rural areas share Japan's demographic trend of aging and depopulation. The SHRC model demonstrates that a state-supported framework is necessary to organize elderly labor. A "Moldovan Silver Guide Corps" could be established under the auspices of local mayoralties or cultural houses, providing a structured way for elders to earn income from tourism.

In the UK and Ireland, the focus has been on the *curation* of oral history as a visitor experience. The National Trust and various community museums have pioneered the use of oral testimony to interpret industrial and rural heritage. The "Living Library" (or Human Library) allows visitors to "borrow" a person rather than a book for a set period of conversation. In a tourism context, this allows visitors to engage with individuals from marginalized or specific communities, for instance, a retired coal miner in Wales or a former textile worker in Manchester (Sirah, 2024). The interaction is facilitated and safe, with the "Book" (the storyteller) trained to answer questions and share their narrative arc. This breaks down stereotypes and provides a deeply personal connection to the site's history (Marin, 2022). Projects like "Ports, Past and Present" in the Irish Sea basin utilize "deep mapping" apps. Oral histories are recorded, geo-tagged, and made available to tourists via smartphones. This allows the user to stand at a specific harbor wall and hear the voice of a fisherman describing a storm from fifty years ago. This "disembodied" oral tourism is crucial for preserving the voices of those who may be too frail to guide in person (Solomon et al., 2022). The "Living Library" model is highly applicable to Moldova's village guesthouses (*pensiuni*). A structured "tea with a storyteller" service could be a premium offering. Furthermore, the digital archiving model addresses the "mobility" constraint of the "Living Human Treasures" (Lupu et al., 2016), allowing their stories to be consumed even when they are housebound.

In continental Europe, intangible heritage is often linked to the preservation of cultural landscapes and agriculture. The Italian project The Marche Food and Wine Memories in the Marche region focuses on the sharecropping legacy (*mezzadria*). Instead of erasing this history of poverty, the project valorizes the culinary and agricultural knowledge of the former sharecroppers. Elderly farmers are interviewed, and their recipes and stories of working the land are integrated into the marketing of local wines and agritourism experiences. The "memory" adds a layer of value to the physical product (the wine) (Shakya & Vagnarelli, 2024). In the community Bad Hindelang in Germany the preservation of "eco-model" farming is tied to community survival. The elderly farmers are key to maintaining the cultural landscape (alpine meadows) that attracts tourists. Their traditional ecological knowledge is the "software" that runs the "hardware" of the landscape (Shakya & Vagnarelli, 2024). Moldova's wine tourism is world-class, but often lacks the "human face" of the peasant farmer in its high-end marketing. Integrating the stories of the *people* who worked the vines during the Soviet collective farm era, or the families who kept winemaking traditions alive underground, would mirror the Italian success.

While geographically distant, the work of the Amazon Conservation Team with the

Matawai Maroons in Suriname offers the gold standard for "Oral Cartography". They used participatory mapping to document oral histories, place names, and sacred sites along the Saramacca River. The resulting interactive maps and "StoryMaps" allow the community to control their narrative and present it to the world on their own terms. It prevents the loss of knowledge as elders pass away and reinforces land rights (Esri, 2020). This methodology is directly transferable to mapping the vanishing folklore of the Dniester river basin or the Gagauz steppe. It emphasizes that the *process* of mapping is as important as the final tourist product, serving to strengthen community identity. Table 1 presents a comparative overview of models of elderly engagement, highlighting their key characteristics, mechanisms of participation, and potential socio-economic impacts.

Table 1. Comparative models of elderly engagement

Feature	Japan (SHRC)	UK (National Trust)	Moldova (Proposed)
Role	"Goodwill Guide" (Paid)	Volunteer / Living History	"Silver Storyteller" (Hybrid)
Management	Municipal Centers	Trust/NGO	Local Action Groups (LAG)
Primary benefit	Health (Ikigai)	Conservation	Income & Social Inclusion
Technology	Low (Face-to-face)	High (Audio/Digital)	High (Digital/AR needed)

Source: elaborated by author

Applying the theoretical and methodological frameworks established above, we can now map the oral heritage potential of the Republic of Moldova. This "oral cartography" divides the country into narrative zones, identifying the specific legends, historical traumas, and cultural practices that elderly storytellers are uniquely positioned to share. The landscape of the Northern Moldova is dramatic - defined by the limestone ridges (*toltre*) of the Prut and Dniester rivers. The narratives here are epic in scale, involving giants, armies, and geological mysteries. Soroca is the crown jewel of fortification architecture, but its tourism value was exponentially amplified by the "human factor" of the late Nicolae Bulat. Known as the "Guardian of the Fortress", Bulat was a historian, director, and storyteller who embodied the ideal "silver guide". Bulat did not simply recite facts; he performed the history of the 1499 fortress, weaving in legends of Stephen the Great. His narrative style transformed the cold stone into a living theater of war and diplomacy. The ubiquitous Moldovan legend of the White Stork (*Barza Albă*), which brought grapes to starving defenders inside a besieged fortress, is spatially anchored in Soroca. While the legend is known nationally, hearing it *in situ* from a local elder who connects it to the specific architecture of the towers creates a powerful "place attachment". The death of Nicolae Bulat highlights the fragility of oral heritage. There is an urgent need to train a cohort of successors, perhaps retired history teachers from the district, who can adopt his narrative techniques and continue the legacy of the "Scholar-Guide". The "Emil Racoviță" Cave (also known as the "Cinderella" Cave) in Criva is one of the largest gypsum caves in the world. Its discovery is recent (1959), but the local oral history surrounding it is rich. Before the scientific discovery, locals spoke of "rumbling" (*duruitoarea*) and strange echoes from the earth. Elderly residents preserve the memories of the quarry explosion that revealed the entrance and the initial exploration. Suta de Movile (The Hundred Mounds) - a geological phenomenon near the Prut River is a battleground of narratives. While science suggests a landslide origin, local folklore - dating back to Dimitrie Cantemir - insists they are the tumuli (burial mounds)

of a fallen army or the work of giants. Another legend speaks of the "Gipsy's Mound" where gold is buried. A "myth vs. geology" tour led by a local elder (narrating the legend) and a geologist (explaining the science) would be a compelling product.

In Central Moldova the Codru region is the spiritual center, dense with monasteries and deep forests. The narratives here are royal, miraculous, and resistant. Orheiul Vechi is the most visited site in Moldova, but its interpretation is often superficial. In the case of Stânca Bunicii (Grandmother's Rock) highlighting the "anthropomorphic" landscape, legends persist of a petrified woman, connecting to broader Balkan motifs of stone transformation. The transformation of Butuceni village into a rustic resort (e.g., Vila Roz, Eco-Resort Butuceni) has created a platform for elderly engagement. The "cooking masterclasses" led by village women are a form of *culinary storytelling*. However, the oral history of the village's survival during the Soviet anti-religious campaigns, when the bell tower was demolished and the monastery closed, remains an untapped narrative resource. The Căpriana Monastery is anchored by a foundational legend involving Stephen the Great. The Legend says Stephen was hunting a roe deer (*capra*). Upon cornering it, the animal bowed to him. Sparing it, he received a sign of his daughter's birth and founded the monastery. The "Oak of Stephen the Great" serves as a physical totem for the story. The narrative is preserved by the monks and the village elders, representing a continuity of "royal memory" in the rural consciousness. Located on the high banks of the Dniester, Țâpova monastery attracts a unique demographic of "esoteric tourists". A persistent local legend claims that the mythological bard Orpheus spent his last years here and is buried near one of the waterfalls. While likely a modern romantic invention ("fakelore"), it has become part of the local oral economy. Another legend claims Stephen the Great married his wife Maria Voichița in the cave monastery here. This site demonstrates the power of "myth-making". Even if historically dubious, the stories draw yogis, bioenergeticists, and romantics. The elderly of Țâpova village act as the gatekeepers to these "energy spots", guiding visitors to the "Waterfall of the Dead" or the "Wish Stone".

The landscape of the Southern Moldova and Gagauzia flattens into the Bugeac steppe, and the narratives shift from the monastic/royal to the pastoral and nomadic. The Gagauz Autonomous Region offers a distinct cultural narrative rooted in Oghuz Turkic ancestry. The wolf (*Kurt*) is the totemic animal of the Gagauz, representing freedom and survival. Unlike the "big bad wolf" of European folklore, the Gagauz wolf is a savior and protector. Elders preserve stories of the "Wolf Holidays" (*Canavar Yortulari*), traditionally celebrated in November, where rituals are performed to broker peace between the shepherd and the predator. Hederlez (St. George's Day) is celebrated on May 6th and is the most significant festival. It marks the movement of flocks to pasture. The oral heritage involves the specific blessings and songs (*manis*) recited by elders to ensure the herd's health. The event at the "At-Prolin" horse farm in Ceadâr-Lunga is a spectacle of this pastoral tradition. The "Gagauz Koraflari" (Carpet Festival) highlights the narrative power of textiles. Elderly weavers explain the symbols, the "Tree of Life", "Ram's Horns", demonstrating that the carpet is a woven text. The region of Cahul and the Lower Prut Biosphere Reserve is rich in ecological and borderland folklore. The village of Văleni became globally famous due to Lidia Bejenaru, the "Bunica" (grandmother) who beat the drum for Zdob și Zdub band at Eurovision. Her fame transformed the village into a destination. Her image and the "Bunica" archetype remain central to the region's branding. Being on the border with Romania (EU), the elders of Giurgiulești and Slobozia Mare hold powerful oral histories of the river as a barrier - stories of smuggling, separation during the Soviet era, and the dramatic changes in the Danube delta ecology.

Transnistria (the Left Bank of the Dniester) presents a complex landscape of "Frozen Conflict" and Soviet preservation. Tiraspol attracts tourists seeking the "Back to the USSR"

experience. The physical statues of Lenin are mute; the true heritage lies in the memories of the "Homo Sovieticus". The elderly of Tiraspol is the last generation to have lived their entire adult lives under the Soviet system. Their stories of industrial pride, collective stability, and the trauma of the 1992 conflict provide the "human texture" that visitors seek. Tourism here navigates a fine line between "Ostalgie" (nostalgia for the East) and political reality. Elderly storytellers often provide a nuanced view that challenges the simplistic "separatist" narrative, offering a human perspective on living in an unrecognized state. Northern Transnistria holds deep, pre-Soviet layers of history. Rașcov (Rashkov) village is a "time capsule" of Polish, Armenian, and Jewish coexistence. It was once a center of Hasidism (the Rashkever dynasty). The ruins of the synagogue and the Catholic church stand in close proximity. Local elders preserve legends of the "hidden tunnels" connecting the church to the fortress, and stories of the Jewish community that once thrived there. It is a site of "vanished world" tourism, comparable to the shtetl tourism of Poland. Camenca village is associated with Field Marshal Wittgenstein, who developed the area as a "spa resort" in the 19th century. The oral history preserves the memory of the "German count" and the introduction of advanced viticulture.

The operationalization of Oral Heritage Tourism relies on specific individuals. Moldova has adopted the UNESCO "Living Human Treasures" (*Tezaur Uman Viu*) system to recognize these bearers. The "Living Human Treasure" title is awarded by the National Commission for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, under the Ministry of Culture. The framework is supported by Law No. 58/2012 on the protection of intangible cultural heritage. Recent initiatives in 2023-2024 have sought to provide financial incentives to titleholders, moving beyond purely symbolic recognition. The current registry includes craftspeople, musicians (*rapsozi*), and dancers. However, a specific category for "storytellers" (*povestitori*) is less developed than that for material crafts, representing a gap in the inventory process.

Identifying potential "silver storyteller" icons and elevating specific individuals creates "personality-driven" tourism products (Table 2).

Table 2. Profiles of potential "silver storytellers"

Name	**Category**	**Region**	**Narrative asset**	**Tourism potential**
Nicolae Glib	Rhapsode / Human Living Treasure	North (Pepeni)	The "Voice of the North", carrier of archaic ballads and doinas.	Masterclasses in folk singing; festival headliner
Vasile Goncear	Potter / Human Living Treasure	Center (Hogineşti)	The "Potter of Hogineşti" tells the story of Dacian ceramics and the "living clay".	Experiential tourism; "The Potter's Fair"
Dumitru Baraban	Craftsman	Center (Ialoveni)	Traditional leathercraft	Workshops on traditional
Valentina Guțu	Craftswoman/ Weaver	North (Gordineşti)	Textile traditions	Workshops on traditional

Source: elaborated by author

While craftsmen produce objects, the povestitor (storyteller) produces meaning. In the absence of a robust "storytelling" category in the Living Human Treasures list, Moldova relies on informal storytellers - librarians, retired teachers, and village mayors. The Ministry of Culture should launch a specific campaign to identify "Village Chroniclers" - elders who may not sing or sculpt, but who hold the repository of village legends, genealogy, and toponymy.

Table 3 provides a SWOT analysis of Oral Heritage Tourism in Moldova, outlining its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within the current socio-economic and cultural context.

Table 3. SWOT analysis of the Oral Heritage Tourism in Moldova

Strengths: ● rich intangible heritage - a diverse mix of Latin, Slavic, and Turkic traditions. ● authenticity - rural Moldova remains relatively uncommercialized, offering genuine human encounters. ● living traditions - practices like colindat (caroling) and carpet weaving are still active, not just museum exhibits.	**Weaknesses:** ● aging carriers - the rapid loss of the "silver generation" means knowledge is vanishing daily. ● lack of infrastructure - few rural guesthouses are equipped to host "storytelling" events professionally. ● language barrier - elders speak Romanian, Russian, or Gagauz; few speak English, limiting direct interaction with international tourists.
Opportunities: ● the silver economy - creating paid roles for elders supplements low pensions and boosts social inclusion. ● digitalization - AR and audio guides can bridge the language gap and preserve stories for posterity. ● diaspora tourism - developing "Roots Routes" for Moldovans living abroad to reconnect with family history.	**Threats:** ● commodification - reducing complex oral histories to caricatures or "disneyfied" versions. ● "fakelore" - the spread of invented myths (like the Orpheus tomb) overshadowing genuine local history.

Source: elaborated by author

To integrate Oral Heritage into the National Tourism Strategy, we recommend the following phased approach:

Phase 1 - The Great Oral Census (2026-2027):

- Launching a national project, coordinated by the Academy of Sciences and local museums, to record and inventory the oral heritage of the 50 most visited tourist villages.
- Using the "Amazon Conservation Team" methodology of participatory mapping (Esri, 2020). Train high school students to interview their grandparents, creating an intergenerational bridge.
- Creating a "National Oral Heritage Map" identifying key storytellers and legends.

Phase 2 - Capacity Building and the "Silver Guide" Certification (2027-2028):

- Creating of a "Silver Guide" certification program.
- Training in basic hospitality, narrative structure, and public speaking. Crucially, this should not be over-regulated but should offer a "badge of quality".
- NGOs like CASMED (active in elderly care) and HelpAge are ideal partners to manage the social aspect, ensuring the work is dignified and age-appropriate.

Phase 3 - Product Development and Digital Integration (2028-2030)

- Product 1 – "The Grandparent Experience" (Bunicii) - A network of guesthouses offering evening storytelling sessions.
- Product 2 – "Digital Story Trails" - An app-based audio guide where tourists can walk through Old Orhei or Rașcov and hear the geo-tagged stories of local elders, dubbed or subtitled in English.
- Rebranding Moldova's tourism offer. Moving from "Small Country with Big Wines" to "Small Country with Big Stories".

The Republic of Moldova possesses a resource that is scarcer and more valuable than its wine: the memory of its people. In a world of standardized tourism experiences, the "Silver Storyteller" offers the distinct, emotional, and authentic connection that the modern traveler seeks. By implementing a strategy of "oral cartography" and validating the elderly through the "Living Human Treasures" program, Moldova can achieve a triple bottom line: economic (creating a unique, high-value tourism niche), social (providing income, dignity, and purpose to the aging rural population), cultural (saving the vanishing narratives of the 20th century before they are lost to silence). The stories are waiting - in the fortress of Soroca, the caves of Criva, the steppes of Gagauzia, and the banks of the Dniester. It is time to let them speak.

DISCUSSIONS

The application of the proposed framework reveals that Oral Heritage Tourism (OHT) in Moldova can be operationalized through the alignment of narrative assets, elderly custodians of memory, and tourism infrastructures at regional level. The results are presented through three interrelated outputs: (i) a regional oral heritage matrix (Table 4), (ii) a typology of "Silver Storyteller" roles, and (iii) a portfolio of feasible tourism products derived from oral cartography.

Table 4. Regional Oral Heritage Assets Matrix

Region	Key location	Narrative/Legend	Target tourist segment
North	Soroca Fortress	The White Stork; Siege of Soroca	history buffs; families
North	Criva	Cave discovery; "Underground Giants"	adventure tourists
North	Suta de Movile	Getic Necropolis vs. Geology	hikers; myth-seekers
Center	Căpriana	Stephen the Great & The Roe Deer	pilgrims; cultural tourists
Center	Țâpova	Orpheus Myth; Maria Voichița	esoteric/spiritual tourists
South	Văleni	"Bunica" archetype; Prut River borders	eco-tourists; birdwatchers
Gagauzia	Ceadâr-Lunga	Hederlez; Wolf (Kurt) Mythology	cultural explorers
Left Bank	Tiraspol	Soviet Life; 1992 Conflict	"dark tourism"; historians
Left Bank	Rașcov	Jewish/Polish Heritage; Hidden Tunnels	Jewish heritage tourists

Source: elaborated by author

Mapping Moldova into narrative zones (North, Center, South, Gagauzia, and the left bank of the Dniester) demonstrates that each region contains distinct clusters of legends, historical memories, and cultural practices anchored to specific locations. In the North, fortified landscapes (Soroca), geological anomalies (Criva, Suta de Movile), and heroic legends create strong potential for history - and myth-oriented storytelling. Central Moldova concentrates monastic, forest, and royal narratives (Căpriana, Orheiul Vechi, Țâpova) suitable for cultural and spiritual tourism. The South and Lower Prut region provide ecological and borderland stories linked to the "Bunica" archetype and river life, while Gagauzia contributes pastoral mythology, textile symbolism, and ritual festivals. The left bank of the Dniester adds a unique layer of Soviet memory and multicultural palimpsest (Tiraspol, Rașcov, Camenca), attractive for heritage and memory-oriented visitors.

This matrix confirms that oral narratives are not randomly distributed but territorially concentrated, allowing the design of thematic routes and story trails that connect places with the people who remember them.

We identify several functional profiles through which elderly individuals can participate in OHT: scholar-guide (retired teachers or historians capable of narrating historical sites (e.g., fortress, monastery, village history); myth-keeper (elders preserving legends, toponyms, and folklore tied to landscape features); culinary storyteller (elderly women and men transmitting recipes together with stories of rural life); craft narrator (artisans who explain the symbolic meaning of textiles, pottery, or woodworking); witness of the epoch (individuals recounting lived experiences of the Soviet period, migration, or border changes). These roles demonstrate that storytelling capacity extends beyond officially recognized craftsmen and can include librarians, former collective farm workers, shepherds, and village chroniclers. Based on the matrix and role typology, several low-cost, high-authenticity tourism products can emerge:

- Evening storytelling sessions in rural guesthouses („Tea with a Grandparent");
- Thematic „Story Trails" combining walking routes with geo-tagged audio narratives;
- Culinary workshops where recipes are contextualized through life stories;
- Festival-based storytelling during Hederlez, carpet fairs, or local religious celebrations;
- Memory tours in Transnistria centered on lived Soviet experiences;
- Diaspora-oriented „Roots Routes" reconnecting visitors with village genealogies.

These products require minimal physical infrastructure and rely primarily on organization, training, and digital support. Importantly, they create opportunities for supplementary income for elderly households while enhancing the distinctiveness of Moldova's tourism offer. OHT is not a theoretical construct but a territorially grounded, operationally feasible model capable of linking heritage preservation with indirect social protection in rural Moldova.

CONCLUSIONS

Oral Heritage Tourism (OHT) can be strategically positioned as an instrument of indirect social protection for vulnerable rural households in the Republic of Moldova. By linking active ageing, the silver economy, and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, OHT transforms elderly custodians of memory into active contributors to the visitor economy while preserving narratives that are rapidly disappearing.

The analysis confirms that Moldova's regions contain territorially concentrated narrative assets that can be operationalized through oral cartography and translated into low-cost, high-authenticity tourism products. The proposed typology of "Silver Storytellers"

and the portfolio of storytelling-based experiences illustrate that this model is feasible without major infrastructure investments and relies primarily on organization, recognition, and light-touch training.

Beyond economic supplementation, OHT delivers social and cultural benefits: it reduces isolation among older adults, reinforces intergenerational dialogue, and reframes heritage from static monuments to living human memory. At the same time, the approach requires careful management to avoid commodification and the distortion of authentic narratives, highlighting the need for ethical guidelines and digital support tools.

The strategic roadmap for 2026–2030, centered on an oral heritage inventory, certification of storytellers, and digital story trails, offers a practical pathway for integrating OHT into Moldova's tourism and cultural policies. Ultimately, Moldova's competitive advantage in tourism may lie not only in landscapes and products, but in the voices of its people, whose stories can generate both meaning for visitors and dignity for the communities that tell them.

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BALANCING CONSERVATION AND ATTRACTION: WORLD HERITAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF TOURISM SUPPLY

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the dynamics between cultural heritage conservation and tourism appeal, focusing on the seven Bulgarian sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Utilizing a theoretical-exploratory research framework grounded in literature review and documentary analysis of UNESCO sources, the study explores how World Heritage status serves as a driver for diversifying and enhancing tourism offerings. The findings indicate that while the UNESCO designation boosts tourism, the sustainable management of these sites faces the ongoing challenge of balancing commercial exploitation with the preservation of cultural authenticity and integrity. This research underscores the vital role of integrated management strategies in maximizing socioeconomic benefits while ensuring heritage is safeguarded for future generations.*

KEYWORDS: *World Heritage, Cultural Tourism, UNESCO, Heritage Safeguarding, Cultural Tourism.*

INTRODUCTION

This study explores reflections and insights into the relationship (whether existing or potential) between local tourism development and the valorization and preservation of cultural heritage. Using Bulgaria as a reference model, it examines the country's seven sites inscribed on the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage List.

In this sense, heritage refers to the assets bequeathed from parents to their children or passed down to direct descendants. It encompasses the collective assets held by individuals or institutions and can be categorized into natural and cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage represents the legacy of tangible and intangible assets that a society preserves and transmits across generations. This includes monuments, historic buildings, archaeological sites, traditions, and cultural practices that embody a community's collective identity (Halkos et al., 2024).

Heritage encompasses a variety of subcategories: such as historical, archaeological, and industrial, that have emerged as the concept of culture has expanded. Drawing on both history and anthropology, it is now understood that human beings produce art, science, technology, knowledge, machinery, medicine, customs, culinary traditions, and social mores. All of these elements constitute a cultural legacy, an inheritance shared across time (Barretto, 2007).

Its importance goes beyond historical memory, becoming a vital element of a people's identity and a strategic resource for sustainable socio-economic development. This process needs to involve the local community and other stakeholders in order to reduce the impacts of tourism and protect World Heritage sites, making it possible to implement a more holistic management plan (Landorf, 2009).

Within the context of tourism, cultural heritage plays a pivotal role, serving as both a primary travel motivator and a fundamental component of the global tourism supply (McKercher & du Cros, 2002). This significance traces back to the era of the Grand Tour; even before the modern concept of "heritage" was established, architecture and monuments commemorating major political milestones were already major draws for travelers (Barretto,

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2007).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), through the 1972 World Heritage Convention, plays an important role in identifying, protecting, and promoting sites of "outstanding universal value" (UNESCO, 1972). This recognition helps safeguard these places while also bringing them into a global sphere of visibility and, as a result, increasing their appeal as tourist destinations (Cuccia et al., 2016).

Being inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List often works as a kind of "quality seal," reducing tourists' uncertainty about the significance of a place and increasing their willingness to visit the destination (Kaharuddin et al., 2021). The organization also recognizes various forms of intangible cultural heritage, such as *garba* (a ritual dance from India), traditional Polish dance, Andalusian flamenco, and the whistled language of Giresun in Turkey (Küçük, 2025; UNESCO, 2006).

One of the most widespread uses of heritage around the world has been tourism, whether through the development of accommodation facilities, food services, cultural centers, or paid visitor attractions (Ramírez-Guerrero et al., 2025). Tourism can also play an important role in valuing culture, encouraging the recognition of cultural expressions, traditions, ways of life, and both tangible and intangible heritage assets (Ignarra, 2013).

The relationship between cultural heritage and tourism is inherently complex. On one hand, tourism can serve as a powerful engine for conservation, generating revenue that can be reinvested into the maintenance and restoration of sites. Conversely, excessive visitor flows, improper commercialization, and a lack of strategic planning can lead to heritage degradation and the loss of authenticity (Garrod & Fyall, 2000).

Tourism can act both as a vehicle for preservation and as a source of pressure on heritage sites. Case studies of World Heritage destinations demonstrate that tourism can generate revenue for maintenance, stimulate local employment, and revitalize regional economies; however, the uneven distribution of these economic benefits can lead to adverse impacts (Olagoke et al., 2026). Consequently, developing tourism in heritage areas requires management strategies that reconcile economic growth, cultural preservation, and community engagement.

Heritage-oriented tourism must therefore be approached with deliberation and caution. Actions taken without detailed planning can yield results contrary to expectations, potentially causing irreversible damage to cultural heritage.

Managing tourism supply in World Heritage sites requires a balance between maximizing economic benefits and ensuring cultural and environmental sustainability. Data from UNESCO (2021), reported by Küçük (2025), show that the cultural sector grew annually during the 1990s at twice the rate of the services sector; by 2005 it generated revenues of about US$1.3 trillion, representing more than 7% of global GDP.

Against this backdrop, it is evident that cultural assets, employment, and revenue generation are significant across both developed and developing nations. Bulgaria, a country with a profound cultural history, possesses several sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, which serve as the cornerstones of its tourism supply. The travel and tourism sector stands as a major contributor to the Bulgarian economy, reflected in the substantial growth of international arrivals in recent years (Statista, n.d.; OECD, 2024).

In this context, this article aims to analyze the importance of Bulgaria's cultural World Heritage sites for the country's tourism offer, examining the relationship between conservation and attractiveness within the context of tourism development.

To this end, the study seeks to answer the following guiding question: How do UNESCO World Heritage sites in Bulgaria contribute to the country's tourism offer, and what

are the main challenges and opportunities in managing the balance between conservation and tourist attractiveness?

The article is organized into five sections in addition to this introduction. The first outlines the research methodology. The second reviews the theoretical background on heritage, cultural tourism, and tourism supply. The third presents Bulgaria's cultural World Heritage sites and discusses their importance for tourism, followed by an analysis of the relationship between conservation and tourist attractiveness. The final section offers the study's conclusions, outlines its limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

HERITAGE, CULTURAL TOURISM, AND TOURISM SUPPLY

Heritage can be understood as a source of benefits that contribute to human well-being and the development of tourism (Nikolova et al., 2021). This perspective underscores that heritage assets are not confined to the realms of cultural or environmental preservation; rather, they perform vital economic and social functions within the framework of tourism activities.

Cultural heritage goes beyond its symbolic role and also becomes an important economic resource. Throsby (2001) notes that heritage generates what he calls a "non-cultural demand," functioning as an asset for activities such as tourism and destination branding.

From this perspective, heritage assets can generate economic value through different forms of use and non-use, including benefits related to tourism, territorial development, and the strengthening of local economies. Both tangible and intangible elements of cultural heritage have the potential to create economic and social benefits, contributing to sustainable development strategies and to the enhancement of cultural destinations (Halkos et al., 2024).

The economic valuation of heritage should consider both direct and indirect benefits, considering the broader dynamics of the territory and the tourism destination (Ramírez-Guerrero et al., 2025), as well as the actors involved. In this sense, heritage is a living element that plays a key role in shaping local identity and a sense of belonging.

A positive example of this activity can be found in several Asian countries (Tan et al., 2023), where local cuisine, knowledge exchange, and daily traditions are expressed through arts, traditional celebrations, sports, and rituals (Sharma, 2024).

In other words, Ramírez-Guerrero et al. (2025) observe that heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible factors, providing a competitive advantage to the locations where it is rooted, whether through physical sites or through rituals that remain vibrant within a population's cultural and artistic legacy.

In China, cities that leveraged cultural and intangible heritage assets to establish a "cultural brand" were more likely to develop international tourism (Tan et al., 2023) compared to traditional destinations that often sidelined these elements.

Beyond symbolic and touristic valorization, World Heritage recognition entails significant management challenges. The administration of these sites involves complex institutional frameworks and multi-level governance processes that require seamless coordination among diverse stakeholders, including governments, international organizations, experts, and local communities. In this context, heritage governance should be understood as a collaborative process rooted in trust, knowledge exchange, and continuous institutional coordination (Siklar et al., 2026).

Nevertheless, Škrabić Perić et al. (2021) observe that while UNESCO status positively impacts international tourism revenue, it does not guarantee an increase in overnight stays without adequate supply management. Heritage-based tourism supply is a multifaceted complex that integrates the primary resource, support services, and the interpretive experience (Richards, 2018).

Cultural heritage can also be strengthened through digital technologies that enhance its visibility and accessibility to the public. Digitalization initiatives and the development of mobile applications have been leveraged to promote historical and archaeological sites, contributing to both their preservation and tourism outreach. These tools refine heritage interpretation and spark visitor interest in lesser-known historical areas (Zahariev et al., 2017).

The central challenge lies in balancing "museumification" (strict preservation) and "touristification" (commercial exploitation), as argued by McKercher and du Cros (2002). In this context, the sustainability of cultural tourism depends on effective collaboration between heritage managers and tourism professionals.

Countries such as Bulgaria use their UNESCO World Heritage sites to gain a competitive advantage, diversifying their tourism offer beyond the traditional "sun and sea" tourism that dominates the Black Sea coast (Nikolova et al., 2021).

One of the broadest definitions of cultural or heritage tourism is attributed to Boyd, who argues that heritage can be divided into four categories: natural, cultural (customs and traditions), industrial, and personal (aspects that hold meaning for an individual or group). Based on this perspective, recreational tourism activities carried out in heritage sites, whether natural or cultural, can be classified as cultural tourism (Barretto, 2007). In this context, culture is understood as a central element of travel and an important tool for fostering social awareness.

Tourism establishes a direct relationship with cultural heritage, as it draws upon historical, landscape, and symbolic elements as the foundation for developing tourist attractions (Ignarra, 2013).

This dynamic directly influences the cultural fabric of host societies and can produce both positive and negative effects on cultural heritage. The valorization of such heritage within the tourism context is not limited to its use as an attraction; rather, it involves processes of recognition, preservation, conservation, and management that link memory, identity, and development (Ruschmann & Tomelin, 2013).

In this sense, tourism management at heritage sites requires an integrated approach that balances cultural conservation interests, economic development, and the visitor experience, aiming to ensure the long-term sustainability of these areas (Garrod & Fyall, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a theoretical–exploratory approach based on bibliographic and documentary research. The bibliographic review focused on academic literature related to cultural heritage, cultural tourism, and the management of UNESCO World Heritage sites in Bulgaria, using databases such as Google Scholar and Web of Science (WoS). An exploratory search was conducted in the WoS database with the aim of identifying scientific studies specifically related to World Heritage sites in Bulgaria within the context of tourism. The search was carried out in the *Topic* field (title, abstract, and keywords) using the terms "UNESCO World Heritage", "Bulgaria", and "touris*", combined with Boolean operators.

The application of this search strategy resulted in six publications, including three journal articles and three conference papers. These results indicate that the scientific literature addressing the relationship between World Heritage and tourism in Bulgaria remains limited, highlighting a gap in the existing research.

The documentary research involved the analysis of information from UNESCO, particularly the World Heritage List and official documents related to Bulgarian heritage.

The selection of Bulgaria's cultural was based on their inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The analysis of their importance for the country's tourism offer was carried out

through the interpretation of data and information on visitor profiles, promotional strategies, and socioeconomic impacts, whenever available in the literature and in official reports. The aim is to provide a qualitative analysis of the relationship between conservation and tourist attractiveness, using the Bulgarian examples as a case study.

DISCUSSION: CULTURAL WORLD HERITAGE IN BULGARIA: KEY PILLARS OF THE COUNTRY'S TOURISM OFFER

Bulgaria boasts seven cultural sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, representing a wide range of historical periods, spanning from antiquity to the Middle Ages (UNESCO, n.d.).

Table 1. Cultural World Heritage Sites in Bulgaria.

Bulgarian World Heritage	Year	Importance of the Tourism Offer
Boyana Church	1979	Located near Sofia, it plays an important role in urban cultural tourism and in medieval art itineraries.
Madara Rider	1979	A symbolic monument of Bulgarian national identity that attracts visitors interested in archaeology and the historical formation of the Bulgarian state.
Rock-Hewn Churches of Ivanovo	1979	Combines religious heritage with natural landscapes, supporting the integration of cultural tourism and ecotourism in the Rusenski Lom River valley.
Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak	1979	A key element of the so-called "Valley of the Thracian Kings," standing out as an important attraction for archaeological tourism.
Ancient City of Nessebar	1983	One of the main cultural destinations on the Bulgarian coast, combining historical heritage with well-developed tourism infrastructure.
Rila Monastery	1983	Considered one of Bulgaria's most emblematic cultural sites, closely linked to Orthodox identity and religious and cultural tourism.
Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari	1985	Attracts visitors interested in ancient civilizations, contributing to specialized cultural and archaeological tourism.

Source: Research data, 2026.

The analysis of the Bulgarian sites shows that their tourist attractiveness is closely linked to the integrity of their conservation. Visitor flows to Bulgarian heritage attractions include both domestic and international tourists from a variety of source markets (Marinov et

al., 2020). This pattern suggests that heritage sites play an important role in shaping the country's tourism offer, helping attract different visitor profiles and diversify tourism products related to Bulgarian culture and history.

The Rila Monastery, for example, maintains its attractiveness through a management approach that respects its active religious function, attracting both tourists and pilgrims (Marinov et al., 2020).

In contrast, the Ancient City of Nessebar faces contemporary management challenges due to the pressure of mass tourism. Naumov (2013) notes that maintaining balance in Nessebar requires strict control over urban development in order to avoid the loss of its World Heritage status, demonstrating that long-term attractiveness depends on preserving historical authenticity.

In the case of the Thracian Tombs, the creation of replicas for visitors (as in Kazanlak) represents an effective conservation strategy that allows tourist access without exposing the original site to risks of deterioration. This dynamic shows that conservation is not an obstacle, but rather a facilitator of a high-quality tourism offer.

A comparative analysis of Bulgaria's seven cultural sites reveals varying levels of integration into the national tourism supply. While all possess high historical and cultural value, their roles within the country's tourism system differ significantly, influenced by geographic location, the nature of the heritage itself, and the degree of tourism infrastructure development.

The sites can be grouped into three categories of tourism integration. The first includes heritage sites within consolidated tourism circuits, exemplified by the Ancient City of Nessebar and the Rila Monastery.

Nessebar stands out as one of Bulgaria's most prominent destinations, benefiting from its Black Sea coastal location and its proximity to the Sunny Beach resort complex, one of the primary tourism hubs on the Bulgarian coast (Davcheva & Tasheva, 2016).

Meanwhile, the Rila Monastery holds significant weight within religious and cultural tourism. Recognized as one of the most vital pillars of the country's spiritual and historical identity, it serves as a cornerstone of the nation's spiritual heritage. As a major site for Eastern Orthodox pilgrimage, it is intimately linked to Saint John of Rila, whose life and depictions in murals and engravings reinforced the monastery's role as a sanctuary of faith during challenging historical periods, such as the Ottoman era (Mihailov, 2020).

A second group comprises sites associated with specialized archaeological and historical tourism, such as the Thracian Tombs of Kazanlak and Sveshtari and the Madara Rider. These locations possess immense archaeological value, primarily attracting visitors interested in ancient civilizations and thracian cultural heritage.

Despite their cultural significance, these heritage sites exhibit more limited tourism integration compared to more established cultural destinations. This suggests a partially untapped potential for the development of cultural tourism within the country.

Cultural tourism occupies a prominent position in Bulgaria's tourism supply, contributing to the destination's diversification (Marinov et al., 2020) by integrating with other well-developed practices and segments in the region.

Finally, a third group includes sites with hybrid characteristics, blending cultural heritage with natural landscapes, such as the Rock-Hewn Churches of Ivanovo and the Boyana Church. These locations combine architectural and religious elements with specific natural and urban settings, offering distinct cultural experiences. However, their lower international visibility and more modest tourism infrastructure may limit their appeal compared to more established heritage destinations.

This diversity of heritage typologies demonstrates that cultural heritage plays

multifaceted roles within Bulgaria's tourism supply, contributing to the diversification of various segments, including religious, archaeological, historical, scientific, and cultural tourism.

Against this backdrop, strategic promotion, heritage interpretation, and integrated management are essential to enhancing the visibility of these sites and cementing their place within the tourism supply. Initiatives that leverage digital technologies for documentation and dissemination also play a pivotal role, broadening access to information and sparking deeper interest among visitors (Zahariev et al., 2017).

The motivations driving cultural tourists typically center on a desire for historical learning, a quest for authentic experiences, and a meaningful connection with local heritage (Marinov et al., 2020). Ultimately, Bulgaria utilizes its UNESCO-listed sites to elevate its tourism standards, effectively transforming heritage into a powerful catalyst for regional development.

CONCLUSIONS

This study synthesizes the insights of Barretto (2007) and Halkos et al. (2024), analyzing the diverse subtypes of heritage and their significance as both tangible and intangible legacies for society and future generations. In line with this, Küçük (2025) and UNESCO (2006) emphasize the critical importance of cultural elements, such as rituals, dances, and languages, across various global contexts.

According to McKercher and du Cros (2002) and Nikolova et al. (2021), tourism activity depends on the heritage and natural resources available within territories, often recognized as tourism destinations, as these resources can motivate people to travel or serve as essential elements within the broader tourism offer. This view is reinforced by Ignarra (2013), who highlights that tourism also plays a role in promoting cultural aspects and both tangible and intangible heritage.

In line with the objective of this study, to analyze the importance of Bulgaria's cultural World Heritage sites for the country's tourism offer and to examine the relationship between conservation and attractiveness in the context of tourism development, Cuccia et al. (2016), Kaharuddin et al. (2021), and UNESCO (2021) highlight the importance of international organizations in identifying, protecting, and promoting heritage sites. Through these efforts, such institutions help enhance local promotion while increasing the global visibility and tourist appeal of these destinations.

The findings indicate that Bulgaria's World Heritage sites represent strategic pillars of the country's tourism offer, adding prestige and strengthening its competitive attractiveness. The analysis also suggests that maintaining a balance between conservation and tourist appeal depends on integrated management approaches that consider both the carrying capacity of the sites and the active involvement of local communities.

Economic considerations should always remain aligned with the social, cultural, and structural dimensions that shape the heritage field. It is important to recognize that heritage ultimately belongs to the people, particularly to the local communities who inhabit these places, experience them in their daily lives, benefit from them, and keep their traditions alive.

This study is based on secondary data and existing academic literature. The lack of recent primary data on visitor flows to specific sites and on the direct economic impact at each location limits the depth of a quantitative analysis. In addition, the study did not include interviews with local managers, which could have provided a more detailed perspective on the everyday operational challenges and opportunities involved in maintaining these monuments that also form part of the country's tourism offer.

For future research, empirical studies using mixed or quantitative methods are recommended in order to assess tourists' perceptions of the authenticity of Bulgarian heritage sites. Future research could also examine how digitalization and digital marketing leverage the promotion of these sites (Nikolova & Ruseva, 2025).

Furthermore, comparative studies between the management of Nessebar and other coastal UNESCO sites across Europe would offer valuable opportunities for benchmarking and identifying best practices in sustainable tourism.

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PROJECT-BASED LEARNING ON SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: STRENGTHENING THE PANCASILA STUDENT PROFILE IN INDONESIAN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

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***Abstract**: Objective - This study aims to develop a model for the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) to support sustainable tourism among vocational high school students at SMK Negeri 1 Cilacap.*

Metode - This qualitative study employs a case study approach through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Informants include the school principal, curriculum department, student affairs department, head of the ULP program, P5 facilitators, and students.

Findings - The results of the study indicate that the implementation of P5 is able to shape students' character in environmental, socio-cultural, and economic aspects through contextual activities such as bamboo weaving, mangrove educational tours, traditional art preservation, local batik production, and regional product-based entrepreneurship. Although students' theoretical understanding of sustainable tourism is not yet fully comprehensive, this model has been proven to increase ecological awareness, caring attitudes, and sustainable behavior. Supporting factors for its success include school management support, teacher collaboration, and the availability of facilities/infrastructure, while obstacles include limited time and a lack of thematic learning modules.

Conclusion - The study recommends the adoption of the P5 model, themed on Local Wisdom, based on sustainable tourism in other vocational schools with a tourism focus, as a means of strengthening character education while supporting the development of sustainable tourism in a practical and contextual manner. This model demonstrates that integrating character learning with real-world practice can result in a holistic learning experience for students.

***Keywords:** Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), Sustainable Tourism, Implementation Model, Character Education, Independent Curriculum*

INTRODUCTION

Education has a strategic role in shaping the knowledge, skills, and character of students so that they are able to adapt and contribute to society (Witsel & Boyle, 2017). Through the "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn) policy, the Indonesian government introduced the "Independent Curriculum," which provides contextual character development for students, including through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5). This program is designed to foster six key character dimensions: faith and piety in God Almighty, respect for global diversity, independence, mutual cooperation, critical thinking, and creativity (Saphira, 2022).

These dimensions of character are in line with the view that character is related to the habits, desires, or motivations of individuals to carry out positive actions in accordance with spiritual teachings, humanitarian principles, social norms, traditions, and customs that apply in society (Judijanto, 2024). To strengthen character building, the Independent Curriculum through P5 also internalizes the 18 principles of Pancasila, including religious values, honesty, respect

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for differences, perseverance, hard work, innovation, independence, democratic orientation, curiosity, love of the homeland, affection for the country, appreciation of achievements, communication skills, love of peace, interest in reading, sense of responsibility, concern for social welfare, and concern for the environment (Pusmendik, 2019).

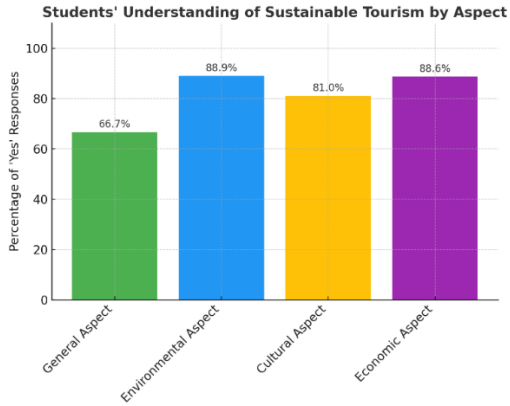
In the context of ecotourism, a sense of caring is an important foundation for encouraging improvements that provide broad benefits. Study Kurniasari et al (2024) Research shows that Generation Z in Indonesia has a high awareness of the importance of cultural and environmental preservation when visiting cultural destinations, such as Borobudur Temple. They are not only seeking memorable experiences but are also driven to take an active role in preserving local heritage. Globally, attention to sustainable tourism has increased, particularly following the global crisis, which in turn has encouraged policymakers to integrate sustainability principles into tourism sector planning. This confirms that collective awareness and participation can influence policy direction and actual practices in the tourism sector (Putu, dkk 2023).

Based on real-life experiences, ecotourism and sustainable tourism practices are evident through the active involvement of individuals in various conservation and cultural preservation activities. These include clean-ups in tourist areas, waste management at popular destinations, participation in the maintenance of cultural sites, and community outreach on the importance of environmental protection (Marahatta, 2024). This hands-on involvement not only fosters ecological and social awareness but also strengthens practical skills, communication skills, and individual responsibility. Thus, this hands-on experience demonstrates that awareness and active participation can have a tangible positive impact on environmental and cultural preservation.

In the context of vocational education, particularly at SMK Negeri 1 Cilacap in the Tourism Service Business (ULP) expertise program, P5 is integrated with the concept of sustainable tourism that emphasizes three pillars: environmental preservation, protection of local culture, and strengthening the community economy. This is relevant to the condition of tourism in Cilacap Regency, which is facing serious challenges. Data shows a 34% decline in sustainable tourism growth between 2017 and 2018, low utilization of 84 cultural heritage sites (only 6 are registered nationally), and minimal local community involvement in destination management. This situation demonstrates the need to strengthen the capacity of human resources who understand the principles of sustainability (Zainal et al., 2024).

Observation results at State Vocational School 1 Cilacap revealed that although students had carried out practices in line with the principles of sustainable tourism such as beach cleaning activities, visits to cultural destinations, and supporting local products, their theoretical understanding was still limited (Hartati et al., 2025). There is a gap between behavior and conceptual awareness that needs to be bridged through contextual and project-based learning (Amin, 2024).

Figure 1. Students' Understanding of Sustainable Tourism



Based on the results of a survey of class X students of Tourism Service Business (ULP) of SMK Negeri 1 Cilacap, it was found that their level of understanding of the concept of sustainable tourism varied across the four main aspects measured, namely the general aspect, environmental aspect, cultural aspect, and economic aspect. In the general aspect, the percentage obtained was 66.7%, which indicates that although most students have shown a supportive attitude towards environmentally friendly and culturally respectful tourism activities, many of them still do not have a deep understanding of the definition, principles, and indicators of success of sustainable tourism. This reflects a gap between attitudinal support and conceptual understanding that needs to be bridged through more contextual learning.

The environmental aspect achieved a percentage of 88.3%, indicating that the majority of students were actively involved in various nature conservation activities, such as visits to natural tourist destinations, education about the dangers of waste pollution, and natural resource conservation activities. However, observations also indicated that despite their high level of participation, daily behaviors related to waste management, plastic waste reduction, and energy-saving habits still need consistent improvement.

In the cultural aspect, student achievement was 81.1%. This figure reflects a strong ingrained sense of local cultural preservation, as evidenced by their involvement in supporting respect for customs and visiting historical and cultural sites. These activities provide students with hands-on experience in recognizing, appreciating, and preserving the cultural riches of their region.

Meanwhile, the economic aspect achieved the highest percentage, at 88.6%, indicating students' awareness of the importance of the local economy in tourism development. Students recognized the benefits of purchasing local products, supporting Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), and involving the local community in various tourism activities. This awareness demonstrates the significant potential for developing entrepreneurial skills based on regional potential as part of the sustainability of the tourism sector.

Overall, these findings indicate that students have a good understanding of environmental, cultural, and economic aspects. However, their understanding of general aspects still requires strengthening, particularly in mastering the concepts, terminology, and basic principles of sustainable tourism. Therefore, a learning strategy is needed that can fully integrate students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

In response to these challenges, SMK Negeri 1 Cilacap developed a model for implementing the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) based on the principles of sustainable tourism. This model is designed not only to introduce theoretical concepts but also to shape students' character through direct involvement in relevant and contextual projects. Through the implementation of P5, students are encouraged to understand and internalize values such as mutual cooperation, environmental awareness, respect for local culture, independence, and social and economic responsibility. This integration is carried out through activities that focus not only on the final result but also on the learning process that encourages critical reflection, self-awareness, and a deep understanding of the meaning of each activity undertaken.

Thus, the implementation of the P5 model based on sustainable tourism is a concrete solution in fostering sustainable awareness and behavior among students. This approach proves that character building through P5 not only builds conceptual understanding, but also equips students with practical skills, attitudes, and ethics of responsible travel that are oriented towards a sustainable future. Through this comprehensive learning experience, students are prepared to become agents of change capable of preserving nature, preserving culture, and developing the local economy creatively and innovatively. As a solution, the school developed a P5 Implementation Model based on sustainable tourism that combines theory and direct practice,

encouraging students to understand and internalize the values of environmental conservation, respect for culture, and economic responsibility. This model is expected to be an effective strategy and practice for the development of vocational education based on local potential in Cilacap and other regions.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, as explained by Creswell (2015), which focuses on the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) in the concept of sustainable tourism in class X of Tourism Service Business (ULP) of SMK Negeri 1 Cilacap. The selection of the case study method is based on the research objective to deeply understand the context, process, and results of P5 implementation in real situations in schools that have unique characteristics, especially related to the integration of sustainable tourism values into student learning and projects. This method allows researchers to obtain a holistic picture of the interaction between teachers, students, and the school environment, and is able to identify supporting and inhibiting factors for P5 implementation in more detail and contextually.

The research data sources include primary data, such as in-depth interviews with key informants, participant observation during learning activities and projects, and documentation of school activities. In addition, secondary data were obtained from school reports, curriculum documents, learning modules, and related literature. The research informants consisted of the principal, vice principal for curriculum and student affairs, head of expertise program, subject teachers, and ten students as the main participants. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, taking into account their direct involvement in the implementation of P5, so that the data obtained were relevant and representative.

Data collection was conducted through triangulation methods, including participant observation to monitor interactions and learning dynamics, structured interviews based on the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile, and the collection of supporting documents. Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, encompassing data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Saleh, 2017). Data validity was ensured through various strategies, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability tests, implemented through source and method triangulation, member checking with informants, and in-depth descriptions to ensure accurate interpretation. This approach enabled researchers to produce valid, accountable findings and provide a comprehensive overview of P5 implementation practices in the context of sustainable tourism

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) program at State Vocational School 1 Cilacap was designed not only to fulfill curriculum demands, but also as a strategic medium for instilling character values that are in line with the needs of modern developments (Husni, 2021). This activity involves students of class X of the Tourism Service Business (ULP) in project-based learning that integrates the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile, namely believing in and being devoted to God Almighty, being globally diverse, having mutual cooperation, being independent, having critical reasoning, and being creative (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Although there is not yet a P5 thematic module that specifically focuses on sustainable tourism, a number of activities have reflected the principles of sustainability, including environmental community service, making souvenirs based on local resources, and involvement in preserving regional culture (Widyaswari et al., 2025). This activity not only provides

theoretical understanding, but also real experience that is relevant to the principles of sustainability.

The implementation of sustainability principles from an environmental perspective is realized through various activities such as school garden maintenance, tree planting, beach cleanups, and waste recycling into handicrafts. These activities foster ecological awareness, environmental responsibility, and skills in wise resource management. his experiential approach aligns with the findings of Pravitasari & Nugraheni (2024), who confirmed that direct involvement in environmental activities effectively fosters students' ecological awareness.

Figure 2. Cleaning the classroom

Image: State Vocational School 1 Cilacap

While seemingly simple, classroom cleaning activities actually reflect the application of sustainable tourism principles on a small scale. This activity falls under the environmental aspect because it raises students' awareness of the importance of maintaining cleanliness and order in the classroom, which is directly related to environmental preservation. This principle can be applied more broadly to tourism destination management, where cleanliness and environmental preservation are indicators of sustainability (UNWTO, 2013). By implementing these habits in the classroom, students are trained to behave responsibly towards the environment, get used to maintaining cleanliness, and understand that every small action has an impact on sustainability.

Strengthening of socio-cultural values is carried out through student participation in local traditions such as sea alms and earth alms, learning gamelan and traditional dance, and creating cultural promotional content (Patras & Japar, 2025). This activity encourages internalization of the values of mutual cooperation, tolerance, and pride in local cultural identity. This aligns with research showing that direct student involvement in P5 on local wisdom increases appreciation for regional culture.

Figure 1. Kuda Lumping cultural dance

Image: State Vocational School 1 Cilacap

In the context of sustainable tourism, learning and performing the Kuda Lumping dance teaches students to appreciate and preserve local culture, while also understanding the economic potential of promoting culture to tourists. This activity aligns with the P5 dimensions of mutual cooperation (gotong royong) (collaboration in performances), creativity (adaptation of movements and artistic expression), and critical reasoning (assessing the impact of cultural preservation on society and the environment). Thus, the Kuda Lumping dance serves as a concrete example of the integration of cultural, character, and sustainability learning in tourism education.

From an economic aspect, students are directed to develop products and services based on local potential, such as making souvenirs from shells, managing travel agencies, and participating in the Ramadan Afternoon Market activitie (Andriani et al., 2023). This activity trains entrepreneurial skills, creativity, and economic independence. These results differ from Sumada (2022) findings, which emphasized character development through a disciplinary approach. In this study, character was developed through project-based productive activities.

Figure 4. Local Sea Shell Figurine Products

Image: State Vocational School 1 Cilacap

Within the context of P5 learning, the seashell figurine making activity teaches students to develop creativity, independence, and environmental responsibility. The production process also involves evaluating economic and environmental impacts, allowing students to integrate local economic aspects with sustainability principles. These craft products have the potential to support the local economy through marketing as souvenirs to tourists, while also serving as an educational tool for students about the importance of preserving the marine environment and appreciating local wisdom. Thus, this activity serves as a concrete example of the integration of character, creativity, and sustainability in tourism education at vocational schools.

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of P5 at SMK Negeri 1 Cilacap has integrated various sustainability principles, despite not yet having a dedicated thematic module. This approach demonstrates that vocational education can be an effective means of developing students with both superior character and technical competence in sustainable tourism. However, there is a gap between conceptual knowledge and field practice, with 63.6% of students not fully understanding the term sustainable tourism. This situation indicates the need for a learning strategy that explicitly links each project activity to sustainability principles (UNWTO, 2013).

Table 1. Summary of P5 Implementation for Sustainable Tourism

Sustainability Aspects	Form of Activity	Learning outcomes	Supporting Parties
Environment	Tree planting, beach cleanups, recycling crafts	Ecological awareness, environmental responsibility	Teachers, local communities
Socio-cultural	Local traditions, arts and culture, cultural promotion	Cultural pride, tolerance, mutual cooperation	Cultural figures, local government
Economy	Produksi suvenir, unit usaha sekolah, pasar lokal	Wirausaha, kreativitas, kemandirian	School business units, local market players

Table 2. Map of the Relationship between P5 and the Three Pillars of Sustainability

P5 Dimension	**Environment**	**Socio-cultural**	**Economy**
Faithful and Pious	The habit of protecting nature as a trust from God	Respect culture as God's creation	Business ethics based on the value of honesty
Global Diversity	Participation in cross-cultural environmental programs	Collaboration in cultural festivals	Promotion of local products to the global market
Mutual cooperation	Environmental community service	Collaborative cultural activities	Joint venture in entrepreneurship
Independent	Environmental protection initiatives	Independent contribution to cultural activities	Managing a small business
Critical Reasoning	Environmental impact analysis of tourism	Evaluation of cultural preservation	Tourism product marketing strategy
Creative	Recycled product innovation	Creativity in cultural promotion	Desain suvenir dan paket wisata

Therefore, the researchers developed a model for the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) with the theme of local wisdom, where local wisdom is one of the six main themes in P5. This theme was chosen based on the cultural and traditional potential of the Cilacap community, which not only has aesthetic value but also makes significant contributions to the economic and environmental aspects (Chen et al., 2022). The results of this study serve as the basis for designing a P5 model based on local wisdom that is integrated with the principles of sustainable tourism, so that students gain a holistic learning experience: understanding values, practicing cultural preservation, empowering the local economy, and maintaining environmental sustainability (Haryanto et al., 2024).

Based on the analysis of the tables above, the researcher then developed a P5 model with the theme of sustainable tourism based on local wisdom. This model is designed to integrate the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile with the three pillars of environmental, socio-cultural, and economic sustainability simultaneously in learning activities in class X ULP SMKN 1 Cilacap. The focus of developing this model is to provide space for students to explore real practices such as environmental management, cultural preservation, and entrepreneurship, while fostering character values such as mutual cooperation, creativity, independence, and critical reasoning. Thus, this model not only serves as a guide for the implementation of P5, but also as a means of strengthening student competencies in facing the challenges of contextual and local wisdom-based sustainable tourism development.

Table 3. P5 Model with the Theme of Integrated Local Wisdom and Sustainable Tourism

Sustainability Aspects	Activity	Learning objectives	Relevant Dimensions of Pancasila Student Profiles
Economy	- Utilizing local products for shell souvenirs - Developing turtle conservation tour packages - Producing regional culinary specialties	Develop entrepreneurial skills, recognize local potential, and process resources into products with sales value.	Independent, Creative, Critical Thinking.
Culture	- Introduction to and participation in traditional rituals - Traditional arts performances - Making Seloka batik	Cultivating a sense of pride in local culture, understanding the values of local wisdom, and preserving cultural heritage.	Global Diversity, Mutual Cooperation, Creativity.
Environment	- Making environmentally friendly bamboo weaving - Regular beach cleanups - Educational tours of the mangrove ecosystem	Raising ecological awareness, preserving nature, and minimizing the negative impacts of tourism on the environment.	Believe and be pious to God Almighty, think critically, and work together.

Source: Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology No. 56/M/2022, processed by researchers

Through the implementation of this model, students are expected to be able to explore and develop the potential of local culture and resources sustainably. This approach provides space for students to actively engage in experiential learning, where they not only acquire theoretical knowledge but also apply it directly in real-world contexts. For example, in the economic aspect, students learn to manage local products as tourism commodities, which fosters entrepreneurial skills and fosters a sense of responsibility for the sustainability of resources.

Furthermore, this model facilitates students in developing critical awareness of the positive and negative impacts of tourism activities, from environmental, socio-cultural, and economic perspectives. Through activities such as introducing traditional rituals, making Seloka batik, mangrove educational tours, and beach clean-ups, students not only play a role as implementers of activities but also as designers of creative solutions to maintain a balance between resource utilization and conservation. This aligns with the goal of local wisdom-based education, which places traditional values as a source of inspiration for learning innovatio (Mulasari et al., 2017).

Thus, the P5 model, based on local wisdom, serves as a concrete strategy to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Implementing this model not only equips students with technical competencies relevant to the tourism industry but also fosters leadership, ethics, and a strong sense of social responsibility. Ultimately, graduates developed

through this approach are expected to be able to serve as agents of cultural preservation, drivers of the creative economy, and actors in sustainable tourism, contributing to regional development and strengthening national identity.

CONCLUSION

The research results show that the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) in the 10th grade Tourism Service Business (ULP) of SMK Negeri 1 Cilacap has been in line with the implementation of the Independent Curriculum since the 2022/2023 academic year. Activities are carried out four times a year with a block system (82 JP per theme), selected through student voting, and integrated into various co-curricular subjects. Although there is no specific module related to sustainable tourism, several projects have reflected sustainability values through a local potential-based approach. Teachers play an active role as facilitators who encourage students to think critically, independently, and creatively.

Environmentally, students participate in school cleanliness activities, waste management, landscaping, and beach cleanups, fostering ecological awareness. Socio-culturally, students participate in traditional arts practices, local wisdom, and community cultural activities, fostering empathy, tolerance, mutual cooperation, and diversity. Economically, students produce and market souvenirs based on local resources, develop culinary specialties, and create educational tour packages, fostering sustainable entrepreneurship skills.

Based on these findings, researchers developed a P5 model with the theme of local wisdom according to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 56/M/2022. This theme aims to build students' curiosity in exploring culture, understanding community development, and reflecting on values that can be applied in everyday life. The model includes three pillars of sustainability: (1) environmental, namely making bamboo weaving, beach clean-up actions, mangrove educational tours, (2) socio-cultural, namely introducing traditional rituals, traditional art performances, making Seloka batik, (3) economics, namely making shell souvenirs, turtle conservation tour packages, and developing regional culinary specialties. This model is expected to bridge the gap between theory and practice, so that students are able to become agents of cultural preservation, drivers of the creative economy, and actors in sustainable tourism.

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TOURISM AND INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT: *The paper explores the intersections between tourism and inclusive pedagogy through a bibliometric analysis of Scopus-indexed literature. The search, conducted on February 24, 2026, using the string TITLE-ABS-KEY ("inclusive pedagogy" AND tourism), identified a corpus of 17 documents. The data were processed with VOSviewer to analyse documents, authors, scientific collaborations, keywords, and editorial sources. The results show a field of study that remains limited in quantity but characterised by strong thematic density, with particular attention to decolonisation, sustainability, youth participation, social justice, and inclusive innovation. The study suggests that inclusive pedagogy can serve as a useful interpretive lens for critically examining training in tourism studies.*

KEYWORDS: *inclusive pedagogy; tourism education; sustainable tourism; curricular decolonization; Bibliometric analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The growing complexity of contemporary tourism, accentuated by post-pandemic transformations, social and cultural inequalities and sustainability issues, makes the need to rethink the educational and training processes affecting the sector increasingly evident. In this context, inclusive pedagogy assumes importance as a critical perspective capable of questioning the cultural, relational and value conditions of training in tourism studies.

In this contribution, inclusion is not taken in a merely compensatory sense, nor is it reduced exclusively to the management of differences in an adaptive key; rather, it is placed within the framework of general and social pedagogy. In this framework, it does not designate only a set of devices aimed at vulnerable subjects, but also a regulatory principle of training that calls into question the quality of educational relationships, the organisation of contexts, and the conditions of participation in learning (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Canevaro, 2006). Within this horizon, inclusion refers to the construction of educational contexts capable of recognising differences, countering mechanisms of exclusion and promoting participation, social justice and educational responsibility. Applied to tourism, this perspective invites a critical re-reading of the curricula, models of professionalisation and cultural representations that guide university and professional training in the sector.

Recent literature shows that tourism education is marked by issues that go beyond the technical-professionalising dimension and call into question the decolonisation of knowledge, cultural sustainability, equity in hybrid and digital learning contexts, the participation of marginalised subjects, and the enhancement of situated epistemologies. Despite growing attention to these issues, there remains a lack of bibliometric mapping dedicated to the intersection of inclusive pedagogy and tourism. Hence, the need to understand if and how inclusive pedagogy is emerging as a recognisable perspective within tourism studies, which thematic nuclei characterise it and which directions of development are outlined in international research.

This paper proposes an exploratory bibliometric analysis of the scientific literature indexed in Scopus on the intersection between inclusive pedagogy and tourism, to offer a first mapping of the field and identify the main thematic nuclei of the research. The bibliometric approach allows for describing the consistency of the corpus, the most influential contributions, the recurring keywords, and the relationships between authors and sources, and then interpreting the emerging themes in a pedagogical key. Despite the limited extension of the

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dataset, the corpus allows us to observe a research area that is still limited but conceptually significant.

The work is structured around the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the main bibliometric features of the international literature on the intersection between inclusive pedagogy and tourism in terms of documents, authors, sources and citations?

RQ2. Which thematic nuclei emerge most clearly from the analysis of the key words and the most relevant contributions of the corpus?

RQ3. How does the literature examined configure inclusive pedagogy as a useful perspective for rethinking tourism education in terms of social justice, sustainability, and the recognition of differences?

RQ4. What limits and potentials emerge, in the light of the corpus analysed, for the future development of pedagogical research in the field of tourism?

METHODOLOGY

The bibliometric analysis was conducted on Scopus in February 2026 using the string TITLE-ABS-KEY ("inclusive pedagogy" AND tourism). The English-language records present in the database at the time of the query and published in peer-reviewed forums were considered. The final corpus includes 17 documents. Given the dataset's limited numerical consistency, the study was conducted in an exploratory manner. The string has been intentionally kept restrictive to isolate contributions that explicitly use the phrase "inclusive pedagogy" in relation to tourism, favouring the precision of the semantic field over the maximum extension of the corpus. The bibliographic records were exported from Scopus and analysed with VOSviewer. The analyses covered citations, co-authorship, keyword co-occurrence and editorial sources. For the construction of the maps, documents, authors, keywords, and sources were considered units of analysis; the minimum inclusion thresholds are reported in the respective sections of the results. Given the small corpus, the results are interpreted as indicative of emerging trends rather than as a basis for conclusive generalisations.

BIBLIOMETRIC RESULTS

Most cited documents

Of the 17 papers examined, 11 received at least one citation. The distribution of citations shows a concentration on a few contributions, which appear particularly influential within the corpus analysed (Table 1).

Table 1. Most cited documents. *Source*: Scopus.

Document (Author, year)	Quotes	Thematic note (summary)
Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2022)	50	Peace, justice, sustainable development and tourism
Barkathunnisha et al. (2017)	20	Spirituality-based training platform
Chang (2021)	19	Criticism and 'Asianization' of tourism studies
Hayes & Tucker (2021)	14	hybrid teaching and Community of Inquiry
Dillette et al. (2024)	10	Black experiences, belonging and CRT in tourism
Corbett (2021)	5	rurality, place and structures of feeling
Cross (2006)	4	heritage/tourism in Jamaica and pedagogical implications
Waegh et al. (2023)	3	PhotoVoice Online with Indigenous Youth
Marques (2025)	2	HISTOESE model between heritage education and sustainability
Mdletshe (2025)	1	inclusive indigenous pedagogies in South Africa
Puzanova et al. (2021)	1	National monitoring for inclusive additional education

The contribution of Higgins-Desbiolles, Blanchard, and Urbain (2022), published in the Journal of Sustainable Tourism, is the most cited, with 50 citations, followed by Barkathunnisha et al. (2017) with 20 citations and Chang (2021) with 19 citations.

The most cited contributions show a coexistence of critical-political themes and issues more directly related to teaching and training processes.

In the bibliometric map of the documents, processed with VOSviewer, the size of the nodes is proportional to the number of citations received (Fig. 1).

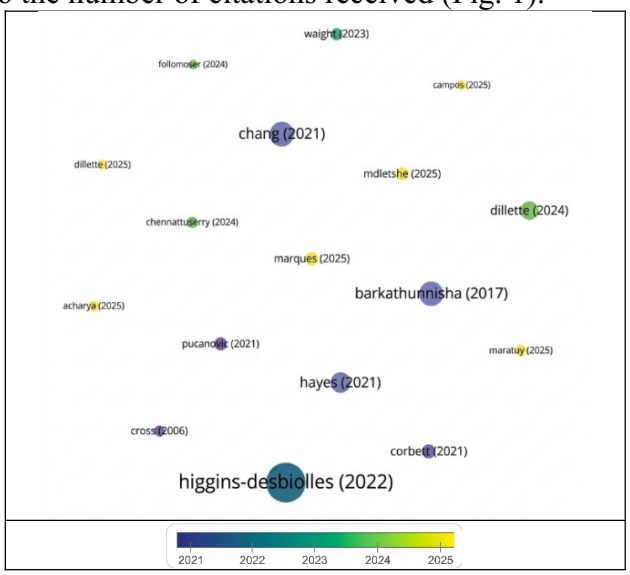

Figure 1. The 17 documents.

Source: Author's elaboration with VOSviewer

Most cited authors

The corpus comprises 42 authors (Fig. 2).

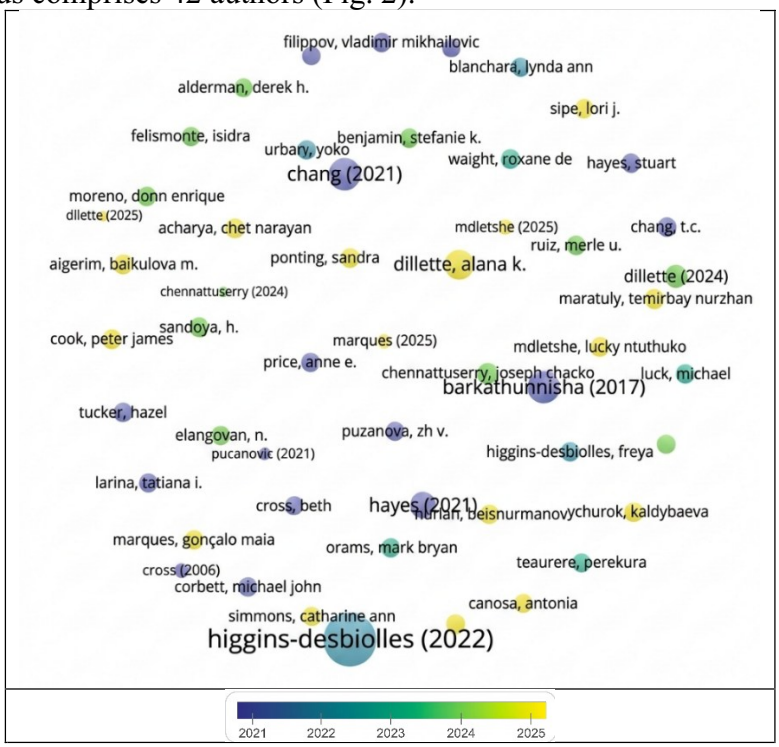

Figure 2. Map of all authors.

Source: Author's elaboration with VOSviewer.

Table 2 shows the authors who have received at least 10 citations.

Table 2. Authors with at least 10 citations.

Author	Documents	Citations
Blanchard, Lynda Ann	1	50
Higgins-Desbiolles, Freya	1	50
Urbain, Yoko	1	50
Barkathunnisha, Abu Bakar	1	20
Lee, Diane	1	20
Price, Anne E.	1	20
Chang, T. C.	1	19
Hayes, Stuart	1	14
Tucker, Hazel	1	14
Dillette, Alana K.	2	10
Alderman, Derek H.	1	10
Benjamin, Stefanie K.	1	10

Source: author's elaboration on Scopus data.

It should be noted that Dillette, Alana K. (2024, 2025) is the only author to appear with two separate documents within the corpus.

Collaborations between authors

The co-authorship network includes 42 nodes (authors) and 5 collaborations among related authors within the corpus. The low density of the co-authorship network suggests limited interconnection among the authors included in the analysed corpus; however, this result must be interpreted with caution, given the small dataset and the specificity of the search string. (Fig. 3).

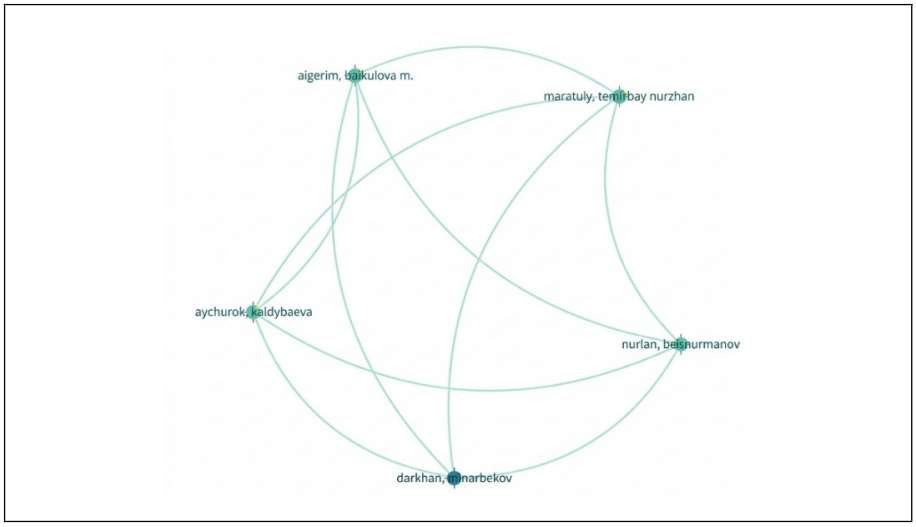

Figure 3. Map of the co-authorship network.
Source: Author's elaboration with VOSviewer.

Keywords: co-occurrence and intensity of ties

The corpus generates a total of 99 keywords (Fig. 4)

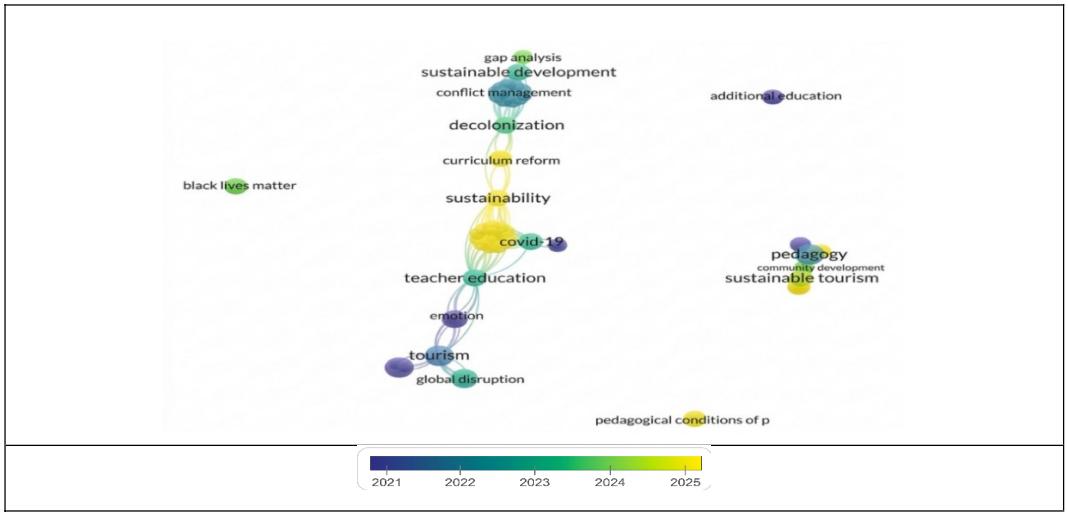

Figure 4. All 99 keywords.
Source: Author's elaboration with VOSviewer

Of these, 67 are related (Fig. 5).

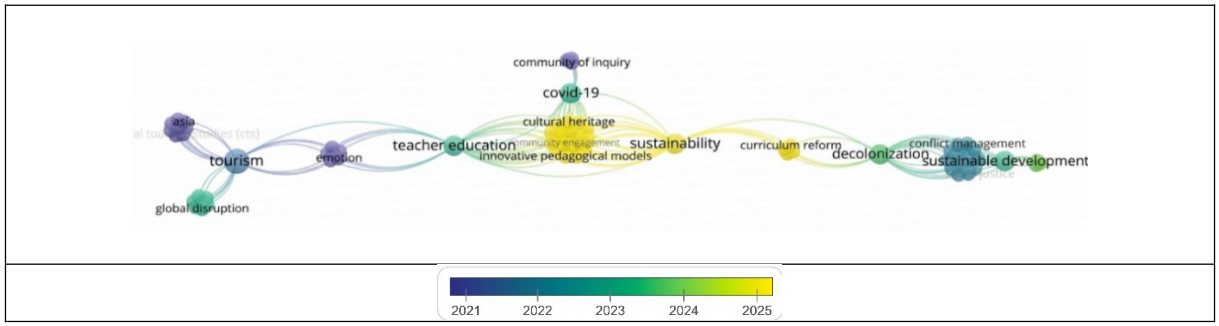

Figure 5. The 67 Related Keywords.
Source: Author's elaboration with VOSviewer

Table 3 shows the keywords with at least two occurrences, sorted by *Total Link Strength* (TLS), an indicator of the overall intensity of semantic links in the network.

Table 3. Keywords with at least 2 occurrences, sorted by Total Link Strength.

Keyword	Occurrences	TLS
Teacher Education	2	25
Sustainability	2	23
Tourism	3	22
Covid-19	2	21
Decolonisation	2	20
Sustainable Development	2	18
Pedagogy	3	10
Sustainable Tourism	2	8

Source: author's elaboration on Scopus data.

The co-presence of 'teacher education' and terms related to sustainability and decolonisation signals that the theme of inclusion is addressed simultaneously as a didactic issue (environments and methodologies) and as a political-cultural issue (equity, recognition, rethinking of epistemologies). The pandemic can be read as a factor in accelerating innovations and critical issues in teaching, while sustainability and sustainable development are configured as transversal frameworks within which these transformations are interpreted.

Most relevant sources

The 14 sources identified include international peer-reviewed journals. The three journals with at least 2 papers in the corpus and the highest number of citations are (Table 4):

Table 4. Main sources by number of documents and citations (at least 20).

Source	Documents	Citations
Journal Of Sustainable Tourism	2	50
Journal Of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education	2	34
Tourism Geographies	2	29

Source: author's elaboration on Scopus data.

The distribution confirms the centrality of magazines that combine tourism studies with education, critical geographies and sustainability.

EMERGING THEMATIC NUCLEI

Starting from the bibliometric results, a qualitative reading of the corpus was developed, centred on the most relevant documents and recurring keywords, to reconstruct the main thematic nuclei of the literature examined. This reconstruction is based both on the most cited contributions, which address critical-political issues and themes more directly related to educational processes, and on the network of keywords, in which terms such as teacher education, sustainability, decolonisation, Covid-19, and pedagogy take *prominence*.

A first nucleus concerns overcoming a transmissive, merely professionalising conception of tourism education. In this perspective, inclusive pedagogy is defined as the intentional design of accessible, meaningful, and participatory learning environments that recognise the plurality of identities and belongings students bring. In this context, reference is made to the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000), which views learning as the result of the interaction among social presence, cognitive presence, and didactic presence. The reference to the model is particularly important in hybrid and online contexts, where the literature highlights how technological and organisational conditions can generate new asymmetries between in-person and distance students, making it necessary to design more attentively to the actual conditions of participation.

A second thematic axis, closely connected to the first but more markedly critical, concerns the pedagogy of tourism as a space for awareness, decolonisation and social justice. The reference to Freire's lesson, the importance of curricular decolonisation, and the attention to non-Eurocentric epistemic perspectives converge in this direction. The corpus suggests that inclusion in tourism studies is often articulated as a critical interrogation of the hierarchies that structure knowledge, curricula, and legitimate representations of the tourism world. From this point of view, the emergence of contributions dedicated to Afrocentricity, indigenous knowledge, *Critical Race Theory* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), and counter-narratives suggests that inclusive pedagogy is understood not only as an educational practice but also as a critique of the historical and cultural conditions of knowledge production. The bibliometric centrality

of themes such as sustainability, decolonisation and sustainable development also reinforces this reading, indicating that pedagogical issues are intertwined with questions of equity, memory, recognition and redistribution.

A third nucleus comprises the participatory devices through which literature redefines the subjects of tourism education. These concepts are situated within the traditions of critical pedagogy and participatory research, which attribute an active role to marginalised subjects in the processes of knowledge. In contributions such as Waegh et al. (2023) and Cross (2006), children, young people, local communities and marginalised groups do not appear as passive recipients of educational interventions, but as epistemic subjects, co-authors of meanings and bearers of agency. In this line are references to childism (Wall, 2019), social theatre practices, and participatory methodologies such as photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) with indigenous youth, as well as more generally, approaches that enhance participants' voices, experiences, and narration. The most pedagogically relevant point is that inclusion is defined here not only as access, but as the possibility of influencing the processes of signification, research practices and forms of representation of tourism. The cases relating to school and territorial contexts also show that an inclusive pedagogy, to be such, must make visible the structural conditions of inequality and promote forms of participation that are not symbolic but substantial.

A fourth axis concerns the relationship between inclusion, cultural sustainability, territories and innovation. In this area, some contributions link tourism training to heritage, cultural citizenship, community resilience and digital technologies. The HISTOESE model (Marques, 2025), for example, relates heritage education, project-based learning, and sustainable tourism, emphasising local contextualisation, collaboration among diverse actors, and the enhancement of heritage as a living resource for the community. Similarly, the reflection on inclusive innovation and smart tourism proposes a vision of tourism development in which the economic dimension, social participation and ethics of production cannot be dissociated. Also, the contributions on rurality, community schools and structures of feeling insist on the situated character of the educational experience and on the impossibility of applying uniform models to contexts marked by specific memories, geographies and vulnerabilities. In this set of studies, inclusion emerges as a principle that connects training, place, belonging and development, shifting the focus from teaching effectiveness alone to the cultural and social quality of educational processes.

Overall, the literature examined does not return a theoretically unified field, but rather a constellation of approaches united by a critique of the dominant technical-vocational paradigm in tourism education. It is precisely this heterogeneity, moreover consistent with the low density of the co-authorship network and the limited internal interconnection of the corpus, that suggests that inclusive pedagogy in tourism is today less a stabilised model than a research site in the process of consolidation. On this construction site, the needs for accessibility, recognition, social justice, sustainability, and the democratisation of knowledge production converge with different accents. For this reason, the qualitative interpretation of the thematic nuclei that emerged should not be read as a closed taxonomy, but as a first systematisation of lines of research that can be further deepened and better integrated in future studies.

DISCUSSION

The results of the bibliometric analysis, read alongside the subsequent qualitative interpretation of the emerging thematic nuclei, offer useful insights into how inclusive pedagogy is taking shape within tourism studies. A first element that can be observed concerns the still circumscribed configuration of the field: the corpus analysed is numerically limited, collaborations between authors are limited, and there are no strong internal links between the

documents, elements that suggest the presence of a research area still in consolidation rather than of an already fully structured sector. At the same time, this limited quantitative consistency is accompanied by a significant thematic density, which signals the theoretical relevance of the theme despite its still reduced scientific institutionalisation.

In relation to the first research question, the data show that the production examined is concentrated around a few particularly influential contributions and a small number of central editorial locations, including journals located at the intersection of education, sustainability and critical geographies of tourism. This aspect is also significant: inclusive pedagogy in tourism does not emerge as an autonomous subfield already stabilised, but as a space of convergence between different research traditions, which dialogue around common problems without yet constituting a compact scientific community. The low density of the co-authorship network, in this perspective, should not be read only as an index of fragmentation, but also as a sign of an initial phase of development, in which contributions appear to be distributed among heterogeneous disciplinary and geographical contexts.

With reference to the second research question, the analysis of keywords and the most relevant contributions suggests that the theme of inclusion is articulated around four main nuclei. The first, of a didactic-training nature, concerns the design of more accessible, participatory and reflective learning environments. The second, of a critical-political nature, is expressed in attention to decolonisation, race, the recognition of marginalised epistemologies, and social justice. The third concerns the participatory devices through which children, young people, local communities, and marginalised groups are recognised as epistemic subjects and as agents. The fourth concerns the relationship between inclusion, cultural sustainability, territories, and innovation, in which the pedagogical discourse is intertwined with heritage, community resilience, and social innovation.

The third research question, relating to the contribution of literature in rethinking tourism education in an inclusive key, is reflected above all in the convergence between approaches that, although different, focus on participation, agency and educational responsibility. References to the *Community of Inquiry framework* **(**Garrison et al., 2000), critical pedagogy, decolonial perspectives, *childism* (Wall, 2019) and participatory methodologies show a common shift from the transmissive-vocational paradigm towards a more dialogical, situated and socially oriented formation. The presence, in the network of keywords, of terms such as *Covid-19*, *sustainability* and *decolonisation* also signals that this rethinking is developing within a constellation of crises and transformations that simultaneously affect educational models, social inequalities and the dominant forms of tourism development. Rather than offering a unitary theory of inclusion, the corpus therefore highlights a set of converging trajectories that attribute to tourism training a function that is not only professional, but also ethical, critical and civic.

From a pedagogical point of view, one of the most relevant aspects that emerged is the tendency to configure inclusion, in the literature examined, as a multilevel category: formative, because it concerns the design of learning contexts; relational, because it involves recognition, belonging and participation; institutional, because it calls into question curricula, evaluation models and organisational structures; political-social, because it recalls issues of equity, memory, representation and access to resources. This semantic broadening of the concept of inclusion appears particularly relevant for general and social pedagogy, since it allows tourism to be read not only as a professional field but also as a cultural and social device within which visions of the world, hierarchies of value, and citizenship practices are formed.

In light of the fourth research question, it is appropriate to outline the study's main limitations. The corpus is small, the search was conducted on a single database, and the string

adopted, while consistent with the investigation's objective, is selective and may have excluded relevant contributions that use contiguous but non-overlapping lexicons. As a result, the results do not warrant strong generalisations about the entire field of tourism education, but rather offer an exploratory mapping of an emerging area. Precisely for this reason, the contribution can be read as a preliminary basis for subsequent comparative investigations, multilingual or multi-database, capable of expanding the corpus and verifying the resilience of the thematic nuclei identified here.

Overall, the discussion confirms that the intersection of tourism and inclusive pedagogy today represents a promising field of research, still open and not fully consolidated, yet already capable of generating relevant questions for contemporary education. The value of the corpus examined does not lie so much in its extension, but in its ability to show how, in the international debate, the theme of inclusion is progressively redefining the pedagogical meaning of training in tourism, shifting the focus from technical-professional preparation alone to broader issues of social justice, sustainability and recognition of differences.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper proposes an exploratory bibliometric analysis of the literature on the intersection of tourism and inclusive pedagogy, aiming to offer a first mapping of a still circumscribed but conceptually relevant research area. The results obtained suggest that, despite the presence of a numerically limited corpus and a scientific network that is still poorly integrated, the literature examined is characterised by a significant thematic density and a growing attention to issues such as social justice, decolonisation, sustainability, participation, and the transformation of educational contexts.

The analysis also made it possible to highlight how inclusive pedagogy, in the framework of tourism studies, tends to be configured not only as a set of teaching strategies, but as a broader perspective, capable of critically questioning curricula, models of professionalisation and the cultural and social conditions within which future professionals in the sector are trained. In this sense, references to didactic models such as the Community of Inquiry, to decolonial epistemological perspectives, to participatory methodologies and to application models oriented towards cultural sustainability indicate the presence of convergent research trajectories, although not yet recomposed in a unitary theoretical framework.

From a pedagogical point of view, one of the most significant elements that emerged concerns the progressive shift from a predominantly technical-vocational conception of tourism education towards a more reflective, dialogic and socially responsible vision. In this perspective, the role of the educator appears increasingly connected not only to the transmission of professional skills but also to the construction of learning contexts that promote recognition, participation, a sense of belonging, and ethical responsibility.

However, it should be reiterated that the results of this study should be interpreted with caution. The limited extension of the corpus, the use of a single database and the selectivity of the search string do not allow for broad generalisations, but rather return a preliminary recognition of an emerging area. Precisely for this reason, the work can constitute a useful basis for future in-depth studies aimed at expanding the documentary perimeter, including additional databases, comparing different linguistic and geographical contexts and verifying the strength of the thematic nuclei identified here.

Overall, the contribution suggests that the intersection between tourism and inclusive pedagogy represents promising ground for contemporary pedagogical research. Its relevance lies not only in updating training practices, but also in the possibility of rethinking the educational meaning of tourism in relation to equity, sustainability, and the recognition of

differences.

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Faculty Engagement in Tourism Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review

João Vitor Santos da Silva[1], Sérgio Rodrigues Leal[2]

ABSTRACT: *This study analyzes the role of faculty engagement in promoting educational innovation in higher education tourism programs. The research adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to map and synthesize academic publications that discuss the different dimensions influencing faculty engagement within tourism education. The review followed the PRISMA 2020 protocol and included searches conducted in four academic databases: ERIC, OASISBR, CAPES Periodicals Portal, and Dialnet. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 14 articles were selected for full analysis. The analytical framework was guided by the Faculty Engagement Model (FEM), proposed by Wade and Demb (2009), which conceptualizes engagement through interconnected institutional, professional, and personal dimensions. The findings indicate that faculty engagement emerges from the interaction between organizational conditions, professional trajectories, and individual characteristics of educators. Institutional factors such as academic policies, organizational climate, and access to resources significantly influence pedagogical practices, while professional and personal dimensions relate to academic identity, teaching experience, and self-efficacy perceptions. The results also highlight that educational innovation in tourism education is strongly associated with active pedagogical strategies, digital technologies, and participatory learning environments, which depend largely on engaged faculty members. Despite the contributions identified, the literature reveals persistent challenges, including limited pedagogical training, institutional constraints, and methodological limitations in existing studies. The research contributes to the understanding of faculty engagement as a key element for strengthening innovative teaching practices and improving the quality of tourism higher education.*

KEYWORDS: *Faculty engagement; Educational innovation; Higher education; Tourism; FEM.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism higher education is configured as an interdisciplinary field characterized by challenges related to the integration of theoretical foundations, curricular organization, and the fulfillment of its social function, particularly with regard to professional qualification and the promotion of regional development (Perinotto; Santos; Brito, 2016; Paiva; Dutra; Oleto, 2017; Milito; Guardia; Silva, 2016).

In this context, Leiper (1981) proposed a curricular organization capable of articulating theory, practice, and critical reflection, arguing that tourism should be understood as a complex system in which economic, social, and cultural dimensions interact. This perspective aligns with the analyses of Pizam (1999), who identified weaknesses in academic training and in the formulation of policies aimed at competence development in Latin America, emphasizing that tourism education should go beyond strictly technical training by incorporating ethical and cultural dimensions.

Ansarah (1995) expands this discussion by examining the educational background of Tourism bachelor's degree holders in Brazil, emphasizing the relevance of integrating theory, practice, and interdisciplinarity. According to the author, strengthening the relationship between universities and the productive sector becomes essential for education to keep pace with the constant changes in the tourism market. However, Sogayar and Rejowski (2011) point out that, despite institutional advances, tourism higher education still presented a fragmented structure strongly oriented toward technicism, highlighting the need for more critical and humanistic educational paradigms.

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The demand for more reflective training is further deepened by Tribe (2002), who proposed the notion of the "philosophic practitioner," understood as a professional who integrates action, ethics, and reflection in their practice. The author criticizes curricular proposals centered exclusively on market demands, arguing that tourism education should stimulate critical awareness regarding the social, cultural, and environmental impacts of tourism activities. In convergence, Perinotto, Santos, and Brito (2016) indicate that the development of Tourism programs in Brazil has been strongly conditioned by market demands and educational guidelines, a circumstance that has contributed to difficulties in articulating theory, practice, and critical thinking, thereby reinforcing the relevance of the faculty's role in curriculum implementation.

In this scenario, the adoption of innovative pedagogical practices is directly related to the level of faculty engagement. Danilova et al. (2022) demonstrate that active teaching strategies, such as technical visits, field activities, and the analysis of real-life situations, favor learning and bring academic training closer to professional dynamics. However, the effectiveness of these approaches depends on the performance of lecturers committed to building participatory and meaningful educational experiences. This understanding aligns with Tribe's (2002) conception of the reflective lecturer and with the perspective of Ansarah (1995), who assigns to the faculty the role of knowledge mediator and agent of educational transformation.

Beyond professional commitment, teachers face obstacles that hinder the implementation of active methodologies. Seixas et al. (2017), based on teachers' perceptions, identify challenges related to student motivation, the understanding of the pedagogical value of activities, and the lack of didactic-pedagogical training specifically focused on the use of these strategies. Similar results are presented by Oliveira et al. (2017), who point out that although several innovative practices have been incorporated into Tourism education, their consolidation still faces limitations, especially due to the insufficient pedagogical preparation of teachers and the lack of systematic investigations into the effectiveness of these methodologies.

Faculty engagement is also influenced by institutional and organizational factors. Alves and Alvarenga (2017) discuss that the increase in academic demands and the expansion of responsibilities assigned to university professors significantly impact their professional routine, generating tensions among teaching, research, and extension activities. In the specific field of Tourism, Perinotto, Santos, and Brito (2016) observe that these conditions add to the historical challenges of consolidating Tourism programs, directly affecting pedagogical practice and the possibilities for innovation in teaching.

When considering the professor as a mediator of the educational process and an agent of transformation, it becomes evident that their role is directly linked to institutional coherence and the educational objectives of universities. Ansarah (1995) highlights the importance of lecturers maintaining constant dialogue with the market and keeping up with transformations in the tourism sector; Tribe (2002) emphasizes the need to balance critical reflection and pedagogical practice; while Sogayar and Rejowski (2011) stress education grounded in hospitality and ethical principles. Together, these perspectives converge toward the understanding that the quality of Tourism education is intrinsically associated with faculty engagement, expressed through innovative, participatory, and socially committed pedagogical practices.

Based on these theoretical contributions, this study seeks to analyze faculty engagement as a central element for promoting educational innovation in Tourism programs, considering academic publications from the last ten years whose most recurrent approaches highlight the main challenges faced by teachers. To achieve this objective, the study starts from the gap

identified in the literature regarding the influence of the different dimensions that structure faculty engagement, guided by the following research question: how do the institutional, professional, personal, and social dimensions relate to the engagement and innovative practices of educators in Brazilian Tourism higher education?

METHODOLOGY

For the development of the research, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was initially conducted as a methodological strategy, with the aim of mapping, organizing, and examining academic outputs developed in Brazilian higher education within Tourism programs and related fields, such as Hospitality and Hotel Management, which discuss the different dimensions of teaching practice. The adoption of this procedure is justified by its ability to systematically gather evidence, identify gaps in the available knowledge, and provide a consistent foundation for the development of subsequent analyses and discussions (Plácido et al., 2024).

In this regard, the objective was to identify, within the selected studies, the most recurrent pedagogical approaches, methodologies, and instruments, with particular attention to factors related to the constructs investigated in this research, especially when associated with teaching practices oriented toward active learning. To compose the SLR corpus, the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) was adopted, widely recognized for promoting greater transparency and reproducibility in systematic reviews by reducing potential biases through the detailed description of methodological procedures. Furthermore, the model enables readers to assess the consistency of the analytical stages and the robustness of the results achieved more accurately (Page et al., 2022).

The collection of studies for the SLR was carried out in December 2025 and involved four databases: ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), OASISBR (Brazilian Portal of Open Access Scientific Publications and Data), the CAPES Journal Portal, and Dialnet. The ERIC database includes approximately 1.5 million records published in English since 1966, comprising book abstracts, research reports, and technical documents organized into 16 thematic areas, according to the classification of the Institute of Education Sciences of the United States Department of Education (ERIC, 2022). Therefore, its use is strategic because it provides access to a broad set of publications focused on the field of education, encompassing different formats of scientific dissemination and prioritizing peer-reviewed journals and recent publications.

Moreover, the CAPES Journal Portal is one of the largest virtual collections of scientific information in Brazil, bringing together national and international journals from different fields of knowledge. In a report related to community outreach activities, Santos and Nascimento (2025) indicate that expanding access to the CAPES Journal Portal for students and faculty significantly contributes to reducing inequalities in access to scientific production, demonstrating the relevance of this platform.

OASISBR plays a relevant role by integrating institutional repositories, digital libraries, and other sources of open-access scientific information. According to Marques et al. (2025), studies on the standardization of metadata within the portal highlight the importance of interoperable standards for expanding the retrieval and dissemination of scientific production. The platform freely gathers a broad set of documents produced by Brazilian institutions, contributing to the visibility of academic production and fostering exchange among researchers. Furthermore, its infrastructure integrates more than 4.5 million documents from different sources, consolidating OASISBR as an important national provider of scientific information and a tool for promoting Open Science.

Regarding the Dialnet database, León-Marín and Calderón-Rehecho (2024) emphasize that it emerged from a cooperative process among Spanish university libraries, initially conceived to expand the dissemination and use of scientific journals. Over time, the initiative evolved into an internationally recognized reference database. The authors conclude that the collaborative experience that gave rise to Dialnet demonstrates the value of library cooperation in the dissemination of scientific information, consolidating this database as an important reference for research in the fields of social sciences and humanities.

Searches in the CAPES Journal Portal, OASISBR, and ERIC databases were carried out through CAFe (Comunidade Acadêmica Federada) access, provided by the CAPES Journal Portal/MEC (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel/Ministry of Education). The Dialnet database, in turn, can be fully accessed through its own electronic portal. It should be noted, however, that this search strategy does not encompass all existing possibilities, since several other databases and tools also index high-impact journals and scientific publications in different formats, including non-digital ones.

The definition of the keywords used in the search was based on the terminological repertoire of the Brazilian Tourism Thesaurus. According to Delvizio et al. (2025), this thesaurus constitutes a specialized tool that gathers approximately 1,702 terms distributed across 17 thematic categories, aiming to standardize the vocabulary used in the field of tourism by indicating preferred terms and their variations. The authors highlight that, like other specialized thesauri, this instrument has a normative and dynamic character, requiring continuous updates by the academic community to follow the sociopolitical and technological transformations that influence the language of the tourism sector.

This continuous updating becomes particularly relevant because, when analyzing recent research abstracts, Delvizio et al. (2025) identified several highly relevant emerging terms that are not yet included in the thesaurus. This finding reinforces the importance of terminological instruments in guiding the proper use of scientific language, avoiding conceptual ambiguities, and documenting the evolution of knowledge in the field.

Based on this process, nine keywords were defined according to the conceptual framework proposed by Wade and Demb (2009), and were organized into three thematic axes, whose combinations supported the search strategies adopted. Among these terms, six are present in the Brazilian Tourism Thesaurus and are p9resented in Table 1, while the others were incorporated due to their alignment with the constructs investigated in this research, even though they are not included in the thesaurus.

In the initial stage of the bibliographic survey, priority was given to journals publishing studies written in Portuguese, as well as to the careful selection of keywords used in the searches. This procedure aimed to ensure greater alignment with the research objective and to facilitate the identification of nuances related to the investigated phenomenon within the context of Brazilian Higher Education Institutions.

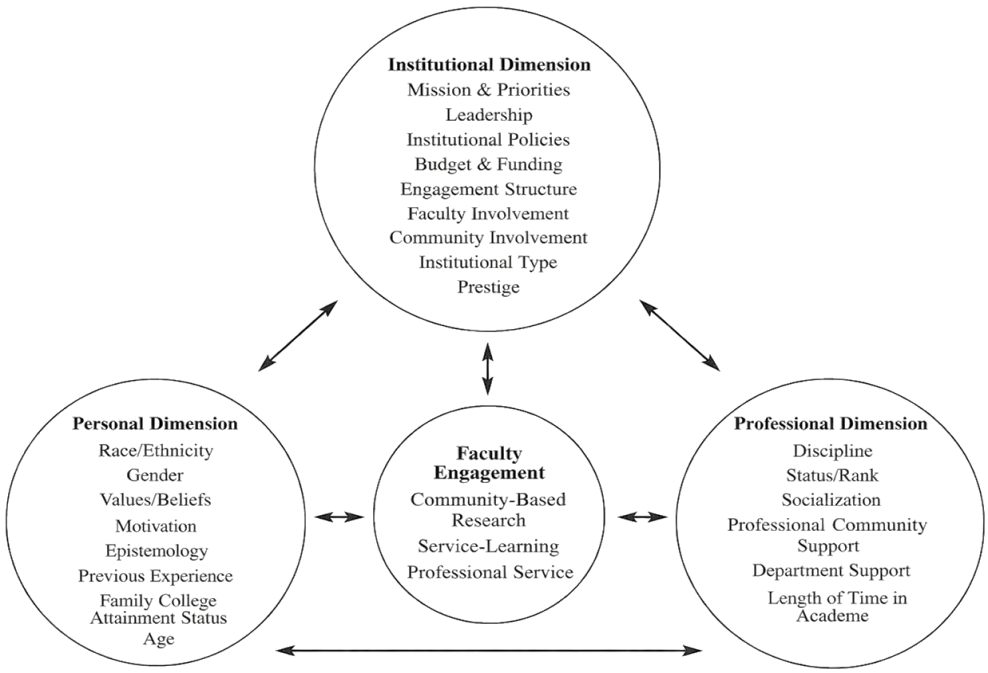
Table 1. Search results by database (without filters)

Group 1		Group 2		Group 3	OASIS	Dialnet	ERIC	CAPES	TOTAL
Ensino Superior (Higher Education)	AND	Profissionalidade docente (Teacher Professionalism)	AND	Turismo (Tourism)	3	0	0	0	3
		Instituição (Institution)			74	17	0	31	122
		Pessoalidade docente (Teacher Personality)			0	0	0	0	0
		Interação social (Social Interaction)			1	0	0	0	1
		Engajamento docente (Faculty Engagement / Teacher Engagement)			0	0	0	0	0
		Inovação educacional (Educational Innovation)			2	1	0	0	3
		Docente (Faculty / Teacher)			99	17	0	34	150
				TOTAL	179	35	0	65	279

Source: Prepared by the author (2025).

The present study adopts as its analytical reference the Faculty Engagement Model (FEM), proposed by Wade and Demb (2009), which presents a comprehensive approach to understanding faculty engagement, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Faculty Engagement Model (FEM)



Source: Wade e Demb (2009).

In this model, engagement is understood as the effective participation of faculty members in activities involving interaction with the community and society, extending beyond the traditional boundaries of teaching and research. The structure of the FEM is organized into three interrelated dimensions: institutional, professional, and personal, with faculty engagement as the central articulating element.

The institutional dimension encompasses organizational factors that influence faculty performance, such as institutional mission, leadership, academic policies, organizational

structure, availability of resources, and relationships established with the community. These elements may act either as stimuli or as constraints on faculty engagement in university and community-related activities. The professional dimension, in turn, refers to aspects related to the academic trajectory and teaching career, including disciplinary area, academic socialization processes, and career position. These factors reflect the influence of institutional norms and professional cultures that shape the university environment.

The personal dimension includes individual characteristics of faculty members, such as gender, race or ethnicity, values, beliefs, motivations, and prior experiences, highlighting that subjective dispositions also influence how professors integrate teaching, research, and community outreach activities in their academic practice. The model also considers that these dimensions establish dynamic and bidirectional relationships, indicating that faculty engagement emerges from the complex interaction between individual and contextual factors.

Thus, the model developed by Wade and Demb (2009) is adopted as the conceptual basis of this research, as it enables the understanding of faculty engagement as a multifaceted phenomenon relevant to the promotion of educational innovation in the field of tourism. In dialogue with the contributions of Leiper (1981), Ansarah (1995), Tribe (2002), Sogayar and Rejowski (2011), and Danilova et al. (2022), the model makes it possible to recognize the engaged professor as a mediator between the institution and society, responsible for translating contemporary demands for critical, participatory, and socially committed education within higher education.

Based on the previously defined descriptors combined through Boolean logic, using exclusively the AND operator, 279 studies were retrieved, as shown in Table 1. This process was also recorded during the completion of the PRISMA protocol checklist. Based on the nine selected terms, seven different combinations were developed and used as search strategies in the consulted databases.

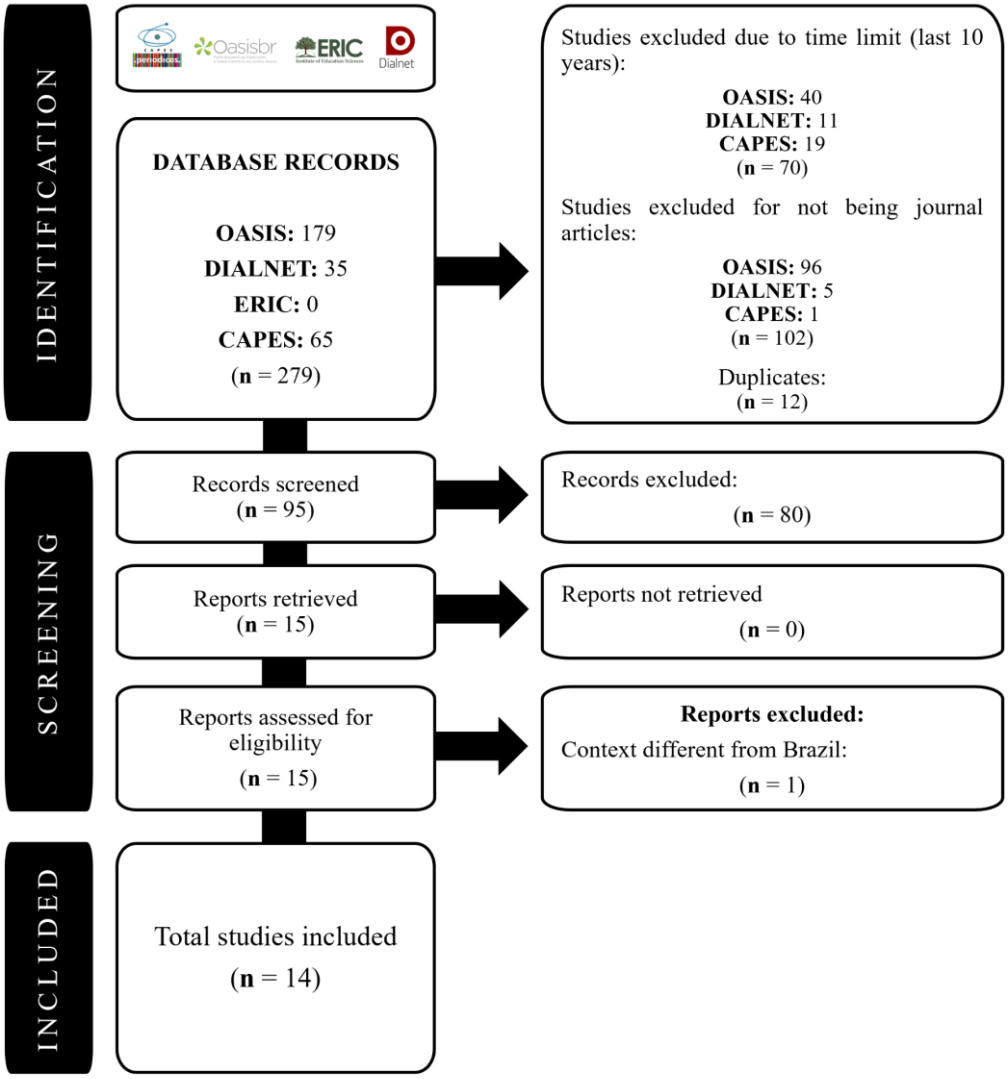
After applying the methodological filters previously established in the review protocol, 107 studies from the selected databases were identified. Subsequently, an analysis of titles and abstracts was conducted, during which 80 articles were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria defined for the research. The exclusion criteria adopted were as follows:

A. Studies that did not refer to higher education;
B. Works not related to the fields of Tourism, Hospitality, and/or Hotel Management;
C. Publications with insufficient information or without accessible abstracts;
D. Occurrence of the keywords in the title or abstract, but without effective correspondence with the central objective of the study.

After the initial retrieval of records from the selected databases, the references obtained were cross-checked in order to identify and remove duplicates. This procedure is necessary in systematic reviews, since the same study may be indexed simultaneously in different databases or retrieved through different combinations of descriptors used in the search strategies (Bonaldo, 2021).

Subsequently, the retrieved studies were subjected to a screening and preliminary evaluation stage. This phase consisted of reading the titles and abstracts of the publications to verify their adherence to the theme investigated in this review. Studies that did not show a direct relationship with the research objectives were excluded from the analysis process. For the organization and systematization of the information extracted from the selected studies, the Microsoft Excel – Office 365® software was used, in which the main evidence identified in the publications was recorded and synthesized.

Figure 1. Diagram summarizing the article selection process analyzed



Source: PRISMA Flow Diagram, The Cochrane Collaboration (2020). Adapted by the author.

Afterwards, a full-text reading of the included articles was carried out, enabling a more in-depth analysis of the contents and allowing the identification of convergences, divergences, and gaps in the analyzed literature. This process contributed to aligning the findings of the studies with the objectives of this investigation, facilitating the understanding of the different approaches related to the phenomenon of faculty engagement and the dimensions that structure its manifestation in higher education in Tourism.

With the application of these criteria, 15 studies were forwarded to the eligibility stage. At this stage, it was verified that all articles were available for consultation, and therefore none were excluded due to lack of access. Thus, all of them were selected for full-text reading. Subsequently, during the in-depth analysis of the complete texts, additional filters were applied related to the methodology employed, the consistency of the analysis and discussion of results, and the conclusions presented. Based on this more detailed evaluation, one article was excluded for not addressing the context of higher education in Tourism or related fields in Brazil, resulting in the final definition of the analytical corpus of the review.

For the organization and interpretation of the results, thematic analysis structured into

seven stages was adopted, following the methodological proposal of Dias and Mishima (2023). The first three stages were considered preliminary and aimed to provide an initial approximation to the investigated phenomenon. The process included data collection, transcription of relevant information, and familiarization with the analyzed content. Subsequently, the material was organized into an analytical instrument, context units were identified, meaning cores were defined, and finally, the emerging themes were delineated.

The application of thematic analysis strictly followed the stages established by the authors. Initially, the data were collected from the articles selected in the systematic review, and the most relevant information was subsequently extracted and recorded, particularly those related to the objectives, methodological procedures, results, and discussions presented in the studies. During the familiarization stage, the texts were read in full and repeatedly in order to understand the context of the investigations and the ways in which different authors approached the analyzed phenomenon.

Next, the material was organized into an analytical matrix structured in Microsoft Excel® (Office 365), in which information such as year of publication, authorship, methodological approach, main results, and contributions of the studies was systematized. The identification of context units occurred through the selection of excerpts that explicitly described elements related to the dimensions of faculty engagement and pedagogical practices in higher education in Tourism. Subsequently, the cores of meaning were defined based on the recurrence of concepts, approaches, and perspectives present in the analyzed studies.

At the end of the process, the SLR made it possible to gather an overview of initiatives involving teaching practices in tourism higher education, particularly with regard to academic training, pedagogical experiences, and curriculum improvement.

DISCUSSION

In general, the analyzed studies highlight significant contributions to education in Tourism and Hospitality, particularly by demonstrating processes of pedagogical reinvention undertaken by both faculty and students, and by emphasizing the importance of institutional evaluations in identifying developed competencies and the gaps between the ideal educational model and the educational reality.

On the other hand, recurring limitations are also identified, such as the need for greater pedagogical preparation among faculty, the demand for improved institutional conditions, difficulties related to engagement, the use of small sample sizes, the presence of subjective perceptions, and challenges associated with data collection and the application of evaluation instruments. The authors analyzed, along with their respective years of publication and study titles, are systematized in Chart 2.

Chart 2. Identification of authors and analyzed publications.

Autores	Ano	Título
Milito, Guardia e Silva	2016	Challenges in Tourism Education: A Case Study in Rio Grande do Norte (Brazil)
Perinotto, Santos e Brito	2016	Undergraduate Tourism Education in Brazil: Evolution, Didactic Articulations and Challenges for Tourism Educators
Paiva, Dutra e Oleto	2017	Contributions of the Tourism Program to the Development of Professional Competencies: A Longitudinal and Comparative Study with Students from Two Brazilian Higher Education Institutions
Seixas *et al.*	2017	Difficulties and Challenges in the Application of Active Learning Methodologies in Tourism Education: A Study in a Higher Education Institution

Autores	Ano	Título
Oliveira *et al.*	2017	Educating for Tourism – Contributions of Technology Use
Alves e Alvarenga	2017	Professor, When Do You Assist Me?: The Expansion of Higher Education in Business Administration in Brazil
Carvalho *et al.*	2018	Evaluation of the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism in Brazil in Light of the National Student Performance Examination (ENADE)
Ribeiro *et al.*	2019	Self-Efficacy Among Higher Education Teachers
Baía	2020	Impact of Organizational Climate on Employee Satisfaction in a Higher Education Institution
Lima	2020	Implications of the Use of Active Teaching Strategies in Student Training in a Hospitality Undergraduate Course
Mascarenhas e Souza	2021	Adaptations from Face-to-Face to Remote Education Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Experience of a Tourism Undergraduate Program at a State Higher Education Institution
Correia	2021	Teaching and Learning in Times of Pandemic: Remote Education in Tourism and Hospitality Programs at the Federal University of Maranhão
Silva *et al.*	2021	From Face-to-Face to Remote Teaching: Experiences of Tourism Undergraduate Faculty During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Silva e Magalhães	2022	Analysis of the Racial Profile of Faculty Members in Tourism Programs at Public Universities in Brazil

Source: Authors (2025).

The emerging themes were consolidated based on semantic similarity and the frequency with which certain elements appeared in the literature, enabling the organization of the studies into thematic blocks presented in Chart 2, associated with the institutional, professional, and personal dimensions, as well as discussions on educational innovation and faculty engagement. This procedure contributed to ensuring greater analytical rigor and coherence in the thematic categorization of the studies included in the review.

Studies addressing faculty professionalism in higher education in Tourism highlight that teaching practice in this field involves challenges related both to pedagogical training and to institutional transformations in higher education. In this sense, Perinotto, Santos, and Brito (2016) emphasize that the consolidation of Tourism programs in Brazil has brought new demands for the faculty profile, requiring teaching competencies capable of articulating theory and professional practice. The authors argue that teaching Tourism is not limited to mastering specific disciplinary content, but also requires pedagogical skills that enable the mediation of learning processes aimed at preparing professionals capable of understanding the complexity of the tourism phenomenon.

Chart 2. Classification of studies by predominant thematic blocks

Authors	Year	Predominant thematic block	Main contributions
Milito, Guardia & Silva	**2016**	Institution	Identifies structural and institutional challenges that affect the maintenance and development of Tourism programs in inland regions.
Perinotto, Santos & Brito	**2016**	Faculty professionalism	Analyzes the historical evolution of Tourism programs and the pedagogical challenges faced by tourism professionals working as faculty members.
Alves & Alvarenga	**2017**	Faculty professionalism / Institution	Discusses the intensification of academic work and changes in the professor–student relationship in higher education.
Paiva, Dutra & Oleto	**2017**	Faculty professionalism	Examines students' perceptions of competencies developed in Tourism programs and their relationship with the Brazilian national curriculum guidelines.
Seixas *et al.*	**2017**	Educational innovation / Faculty engagement	Identifies challenges in the adoption of active methodologies, including student motivation and faculty pedagogical training.
Oliveira *et al.*	**2017**	Educational innovation	Demonstrates how digital technologies can strengthen professional competencies and pedagogical innovation in Tourism education
Carvalho *et al*.	**2018**	Institution	Analyzes ENADE indicators and the perceptions of faculty and program coordinators regarding institutional evaluation and its effects on higher education.
Baía	**2019**	Institution	Shows how the organizational climate influences the satisfaction and motivation of employees and faculty members.
Ribeiro et al.	**2019**	Faculty personal dimension / Faculty engagement	Identifies psychological and professional factors that influence faculty confidence and performance.
Lima	**2020**	Educational innovation / Faculty engagement	Demonstrates how active methodologies promote student participation and pedagogical involvement.
Silva *et al.*	**2021**	Institution	Investigates pedagogical adaptations and faculty challenges during emergency remote teaching.
Correia	**2021**	Educational innovation	Analyzes digital pedagogical practices and changes in teaching dynamics during the pandemic.
Mascarenhas & Souza	**2021**	Educational innovation	Discusses pedagogical strategies and the reconfiguration of the teaching–learning process.
Silva & Magalhães	**2022**	Faculty personal dimension	Examines racial inequalities in Tourism teaching, highlighting structural and identity-related factors within the academic profession.

Source: Authors (2025).

This discussion aligns with the reflection presented by Alves and Alvarenga (2017), who analyze faculty professionalism within the context of the expansion of Brazilian higher education. According to the authors, the increase in the number of programs and students has intensified the demands placed on university professors, expanding their academic and administrative responsibilities. In this scenario, faculty professionalism became characterized by multiple roles that include teaching, research, university outreach, and academic management, requiring new forms of work organization and continuous professional development.

When discussing competency development in tourism higher education, Paiva, Dutra, and Oleto (2017) contribute to broadening this understanding by demonstrating that faculty performance plays a central role in the development of students' professional competencies. The authors highlight that Tourism programs must promote education aligned with the national curriculum guidelines, encompassing analytical, critical, and operational competencies necessary for professional practice in the tourism sector. In this process, the faculty member assumes a strategic role as a mediator of knowledge and as the agent responsible for structuring educational experiences that connect academic content with market demands.

Taken together, these three studies converge in indicating that faculty professionalism in Tourism is strongly associated with the ability to integrate academic knowledge with practical experiences from the sector. Understanding teaching practice in tourism higher education therefore requires recognizing that faculty professionalism is constructed through continuous interaction with the institutional environment, which may either foster or limit the development of innovative educational practices committed to students' academic and professional training.

In this regard, Milito, Guardia, and Silva (2016) analyze the challenges faced by a Tourism program in the countryside of the state of Rio Grande do Norte and demonstrate that institutional factors, such as educational policies, infrastructure conditions, and regional development strategies directly impact the sustainability of Tourism education. The authors point out that even when research and community outreach projects are expanding, structural limitations and difficulties in retaining faculty and students may compromise the continuity and strengthening of higher education programs in the field.

This institutional perspective is also observed in the study by Carvalho et al. (2018), which analyzes the evaluation of Tourism programs in Brazil through educational indicators. The study demonstrates that institutional assessment instruments not only measure student performance but also influence pedagogical organization, academic management practices, and strategies for improving academic programs. In this context, the institutional dimension becomes a structuring element of higher education quality, as it establishes evaluation parameters, regulates the offering of programs, and guides processes of curricular and pedagogical reform within higher education institutions.

The discussion on the role of the institution also appears in the study by Baía (2019), which investigates the impact of organizational climate in higher education institutions. The author demonstrates that institutional factors such as leadership, organizational culture, internal communication, and professional recognition directly affect the satisfaction and motivation of academic workers. In dialogue with these analyses, Silva et al. (2021) highlight that abrupt institutional changes can also significantly influence faculty performance. By investigating the experiences of professors in Tourism programs during the transition from face-to-face teaching to emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors show that institutional support, access to technological resources, and pedagogical guidance provided by universities were decisive for the adaptation of teaching practices.

The literature suggests that the quality of Tourism education largely depends on the institutional conditions that structure and sustain faculty work. In addition to the contexts of training and institutional environment, a set of individual characteristics, life trajectories, beliefs, values, and perceptions may influence how professors relate to their profession and to the teaching–learning process.

In this sense, Silva and Magalhães (2022) analyze the racial profile of faculty members in Tourism programs at Brazilian public universities and reveal that the composition of the academic staff reflects structural inequalities that permeate the academic field. The authors demonstrate that the reduced presence of Black faculty members in the area is not merely a demographic issue, but also reflects historical and social processes that influence opportunities for access, permanence, and professional recognition in academic careers. In this way, the personal dimension of teaching comes to be understood as part of a broader context of social and institutional relations.

The analysis proposed by Silva and Magalhães (2022) corroborates with the perspective presented by Ribeiro et al. (2019) by emphasizing that individual characteristics of professors also influence their professional performance. By investigating faculty self-efficacy in higher

education, the authors demonstrate that the perception professors have of their own teaching ability significantly impacts their pedagogical practices and the ways in which they face academic challenges. When these perspectives are brought together, it becomes evident that the personal dimension of teaching involves both identity-related and psychological aspects of the profession.

While Silva and Magalhães (2022) highlight how social and identity-related factors influence the presence and experiences of faculty members in higher education, Ribeiro et al. (2019) emphasize subjective factors associated with self-perception of competence and the development of professional confidence. In both cases, the authors demonstrate that university teaching cannot be understood solely through institutional or pedagogical aspects, as it is also shaped by personal dimensions that influence how professors position themselves within the academic environment.

Understanding these dimensions therefore allows recognition that teaching is also a process marked by individual trajectories, subjective perceptions, and personal experiences, which influence the construction of faculty engagement and pedagogical practice within the university context. The complexity involved in teaching practice extends beyond the mere transmission of content, encompassing motivational, pedagogical, and relational aspects that directly affect the teaching–learning process.

In this regard, Ribeiro et al. (2019) discuss the role of faculty self-efficacy as a fundamental element for understanding professors' involvement in their academic activities. According to the authors, the perception faculty members have of their own teaching capabilities influences how they address pedagogical challenges, plan their classes, and interact with students, indicating that psychological factors and professional experiences play an important role in strengthening faculty engagement.

This perspective is aligned with the reflections of Lima (2020), who analyzes the use of active teaching strategies in education in Hospitality and Tourism. The author argues that faculty engagement is particularly manifested in the professor's willingness to adopt innovative pedagogical practices that stimulate student participation and promote more meaningful learning. In this sense, the engaged professor assumes a mediating role in the educational process, creating learning environments that encourage interaction, problem-solving, and collective knowledge construction—elements considered essential for professional training in the tourism sector.

This discussion also appears in the study by Seixas et al. (2017), who investigate the challenges faced by faculty members when applying active methodologies in Tourism education. The authors demonstrate that the implementation of these strategies requires a high level of teacher involvement in the pedagogical process, as it demands detailed planning, continuous monitoring of students, and ongoing adaptation of classroom activities.

Furthermore, the studies suggest that faculty engagement is directly related to the ability to adapt to contemporary educational transformations. The adoption of active methodologies, highlighted by Lima (2020) and Seixas et al. (2017), requires professors to adopt a reflective and flexible posture in response to the demands of the educational process. In this sense, the professional confidence discussed by Ribeiro et al. (2019) may encourage faculty members to experiment with new pedagogical strategies and face the challenges inherent in innovation in higher education.

Thus, the discussion on faculty engagement is closely linked to educational innovation in higher education, as innovations are constructed within the teaching process itself, where technology is not limited merely to the use of the internet. Oliveira et al. (2017) highlight that the use of digital technologies in higher education represents one pathway toward pedagogical

innovation, as it enables new forms of interaction, access to information, and knowledge construction.

This technological perspective corroborates with the reflections of Seixas et al. (2017), who analyze the application of active methodologies in Tourism education. The authors argue that educational innovation is associated with overcoming traditional teaching models based on the transmission of content, advocating the adoption of pedagogical strategies that stimulate students' active participation in the learning process. However, the study also reveals that the implementation of these methodologies faces significant challenges, such as difficulties in student motivation, structural limitations, and gaps in faculty pedagogical training - factors that may hinder the consolidation of innovative practices in higher education.

In line with these discussions, Lima (2020) emphasizes that the adoption of active teaching strategies in the context of Tourism and Hospitality education contributes to strengthening student engagement and expanding opportunities for meaningful learning. The author argues that methodologies that encourage participation, problem-solving, and collective knowledge construction facilitate the integration of theory and practice, a fundamental aspect for preparing professionals capable of working in a sector characterized by complex dynamics and constant transformations.

Educational innovation was also strongly driven by the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as demonstrated in the studies by Correia (2021) and Mascarenhas and Souza (2021). By analyzing remote teaching experiences in Tourism and Hospitality programs, the authors show that the need for rapid adaptation to online activities led faculty members and institutions to rethinking their pedagogical practices.

Although these studies highlight important advances in the incorporation of innovative practices, they also demonstrate that educational innovation depends on multiple institutional and pedagogical factors. While Oliveira et al. (2017) emphasize the role of digital technologies in transforming teaching practices, Seixas et al. (2017) stress that pedagogical innovation requires deeper changes in educational culture and faculty training. Meanwhile, Lima (2020) underscores the potential of active methodologies to promote more participatory learning processes.

CONCLUSIONS

The present systematic literature review made it possible to identify that faculty engagement in tourism higher education constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon resulting from the dynamic interaction between institutional, professional, and personal factors. By organizing the analyzed studies according to the dimensions proposed by the Faculty Engagement Model (FEM), it was possible to understand that faculty engagement is not limited to participation in academic activities, but involves a complex process of mediation between the institutional context, professional trajectory, and individual dispositions of professors.

Within the institutional dimension, the studies demonstrate that academic policies, evaluation processes, organizational climate, and the availability of resources directly influence faculty working conditions and the possibilities for innovation in higher education. The professional dimension, in turn, reveals that faculty engagement is closely related to the construction of academic professionalism and to the professor's ability to integrate scientific knowledge, experiences from the tourism sector, and reflective pedagogical practices.

Faculty members in Tourism assume a strategic role in articulating the relationship between universities and society, being responsible for translating market demands, social challenges, and theoretical advances into meaningful educational experiences. However, the increase of responsibilities assigned to professors in contemporary higher education highlights

the need for institutional policies that value faculty professional development and expand the conditions for pedagogical innovation.

The analysis of the personal dimension reinforces the understanding that faculty engagement is also a socially constructed process, shaped by identity-related and contextual issues that influence professional experiences in higher education. In this scenario, educational innovation emerges as a structuring element for transforming tourism higher education.

The analyzed literature indicates that innovative pedagogical practices—including active methodologies, the use of digital technologies, and participatory learning strategies—contribute to bringing academic training closer to the contemporary demands of the tourism sector. However, such initiatives depend directly on the level of faculty engagement and on the institutional conditions that support the development of these practices. This demonstrates that educational innovation cannot be understood merely as the adoption of new tools, but rather as the result of broader pedagogical and organizational processes.

Despite the contributions presented, this research has some limitations that should be considered. The review focused on specific databases and prioritized publications written in Portuguese, which may have restricted the inclusion of studies developed in other international contexts. Furthermore, the relatively small number of studies identified indicates that faculty engagement in higher education in Tourism remains an emerging field of investigation, with theoretical and empirical gaps that require further exploration.

Even with these limitations, the study contributes to advancing the literature by systematizing evidence on faculty engagement in tourism higher education and proposing an integrated analysis of the different dimensions that structure this phenomenon. By engaging with the conceptual model of Wade and Demb (2009), the research broadens the understanding of faculty engagement as a central element for promoting educational innovation and strengthening academic training in the field of Tourism. In this way, the study provides theoretical and analytical insights that may guide future investigations on university teaching, academic management, and the development of innovative pedagogical practices.

Finally, it is recommended that future research advance empirical investigations on faculty engagement in Tourism programs through more diverse methodological approaches, including comparative studies between institutions, quantitative analyses of factors influencing engagement, and longitudinal investigations that allow understanding the evolution of this phenomenon throughout the academic career. Such studies may contribute to deepening the understanding of the relationships between faculty engagement, educational innovation, and the quality of tourism higher education, thereby strengthening the academic and professional development of the field.

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RESEARCH IN TOURISM AND HOTEL INDUSTRY: ANALYSIS OF THE SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION OF THE PROFESSORS OF A BRAZILIAN FEDERAL UNIVERSITY (2019-2023)

Cybele Brandão Santos[1], Paula Dutra Leão de Menezes[2], Marcleide Maria Macêdo Pederneiras[3], Márcia Félix da Silva[4]

ABSTRACT: *The present study analyzed the scientific production of teachers of the Department of Tourism and Hospitality of a Federal University in the Northeast region of Brazil, from 2019 to 2023. A case, bibliographic and descriptive study was carried out. The analyzed department is composed of 22 professors of the department, with a level of doctoral training predominantly in the area of Applied Social Sciences. In the period analyzed, 102 published scientific articles were identified. The methods most used by teachers in research were exploratory and descriptive. In relation to publications, it was observed that predominantly the national journals, in the classifications Qualis CAPES A3 and A4, being most of the publications in Portuguese. In this sense, there is a need for the internationalization of studies in the area, which is also found when analyzing the inter-institutional partnerships considering that all the partnerships are between Brazilian universities, especially from the northeast region of the country. In this regard, it is essential to expand and strengthen partnerships for the development and consolidation of the area.*

KEYWORDS: *Tourism; Hotel industry; Scientific production; Faculty; University.*

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Brazil is based on the axes of teaching, research and extension, with universities responsible for the development and production of scientific knowledge. In this context, teachers and undergraduate and postgraduate students play a fundamental role in the dissemination of knowledge, both within the academic community and to society (Law no. 9.394, 1996).

Cooper, Sherherd and Westlake (2001), point out that education in tourism and hospitality present different problems and agendas between countries, highlighting the absence of uniformity in teaching, either by academic or institutional structure, contributing to the different approaches in the international context.

Menezes and Teixeira (2016) highlight that the first tourism courses in Brazil emerged in the 1970s, strongly influenced by the American academic model, based on the rationalist perspective aligned with efficiency and modernization, giving the courses a pragmatic character, what raised concerns in the academic milieu. The shortage of bachelor's degrees in tourism, combined with social conditions were responsible for directly influencing education and research development in the area in the country.

Teixeira (2001) highlights that the courses of tourism and hospitality presented significant growth in the 1990s. According to the author, the expansion of these courses was associated with several factors, mainly by the tourist potential of the regions, which drove the

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demand for qualified professionals and the adoption of strategies aimed at training and attracting students and teachers to an area considered scarce. Among the main challenges faced by the courses, the limitation of financial resources and public initiatives stand out.

Rejowsk (2010) highlights the importance of studies on scientific production in the field of tourism. According to the author, in Brazil, these investigations began in the 1990s and show the relationship between the fields of Tourism and Hospitality. When analyzing scientific productions, there is a growing interest of Brazilian researchers in the organization of knowledge produced in the area of tourism, mainly within the scope of National Association for Research and Graduate Studies in Tourism (ANPTUR).

Holanda, Widmer and Leal (2012), when addressing the scientific field of tourism, reveal that its bases were consolidated throughout the twentieth century, with strengthening from the 2000s, evidenced by the growth of specialized bibliographic production. When analyzing the context of research in the Brazilian scenario, the authors point out the limited practice of systematic reviews of the literature, reinforcing the importance of revisionist studies in order to understand the objectives of the research carried out and identify existing gaps in the field.

That said, there is still much to be researched and deepened on scientific production in tourism and hospitality. What are the studies carried out by professors linked to tourism and hotel industry courses of federal universities in the northeast region? Considering that public universities are responsible for the majority of Brazilian scientific production, this work analyzed the scientific production of the teachers of the Department of Tourism and Hospitality of a Federal University of the Northeast region of Brazil, in the period from 2019 to 2023. The justification for the study on the scientific production of a given area is relevant, since it allows to identify the scientific production, the main research areas and themes, the journals that publish the research, the most used methodologies. The results of the research, by verifying the areas and topics studied by the teachers, can contribute to the scientific knowledge of the area and to outline future studies aimed at deepening and consolidating scientific research in Tourism and Hotel Industry.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is characterized as a case study. According to Yin (2015), he defines that the case study is a widely used research method in different areas of knowledge, as it enables an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena, whether individual, group or organizational. Gil (2025) states that the case study does not aim to generalize characteristics of a population, but to provide a broad understanding of the investigated phenomenon, allowing the identification of factors that influence or are influenced by it. A bibliographic and descriptive research was carried out.

In the context of public universities in the Northeast region, and based on data from the Census of Higher Education - INEP/MEC (2022) it was found that there are 6 bachelor's degree courses in tourism and 3 in hotel management. For the research was selected a public university of the northeast region of Brazil, to survey the scientific productions published by teachers in scientific journals. As a data source, the Lattes resumes of the Lattes/CNpq Platform were used, and the period for data analysis was established between 2019-2023.

RESULTS

The university analyzed has had a bachelor's degree in Tourism for 32 years and a bachelor's degree in Hospitality for 30 years, also offering the Postgraduate Program in Hotel Industry and Tourism (PPHTur) stricto sensu. The results of the research indicate that the

Department of Tourism and Hospitality of the university analyzed, is composed of 22 professors, with institutional bond time ranging from 1 year to 32 years. As for academic training, it was found that 77.27% of teachers have a doctorate degree, being the area of Applied Social Sciences that has the highest representation with 76% of doctoral degrees.

Regarding the scientific production carried out in the period from 2019 to 2023, 102 publications were identified. The year 2021 was the one with the highest number of publications, with 31, and there was a drop in production in the following years; the year 2023 recorded the lowest number of publications, with 11. Regarding the classification of journals, according to Qualis CAPES, it was found that teachers published more in journals of strata A3 and A4, being 57 scientific journals. The national journals also gathered the largest number of publications 63%, with emphasis on *Revista Brasileira de Pesquisa e Turismo* (Qualis Capes A3), which presented the largest number of published articles.

Among the most researched topics are Tourism, Experience, Consumption and Market, followed by Management, Marketing and Administration and Hospitality, Food and Services. Regarding the methodologies, exploratory and descriptive approaches highlight in the development of research. The inter-institutional partnerships have included 36 collaborations between institutions in the country, with emphasis on the Northeast region that has 52% of the collaborations.

DISCUSSION

The data analysis shows that 22 professors work in the Department of Tourism and Hospitality of the federal university. Teachers with 13 and 15 years of experience stand out in the graph, representing 45.4% of the teachers. As for the variation in the time of activity, the teacher with the shortest time of institutional bond has 1 year, while the longest time of activity, has 32 years of university. In relation to the Lattes Curriculum, 64% of the professors keep their curricula updated, while 36% represent professor with outdated curricula.

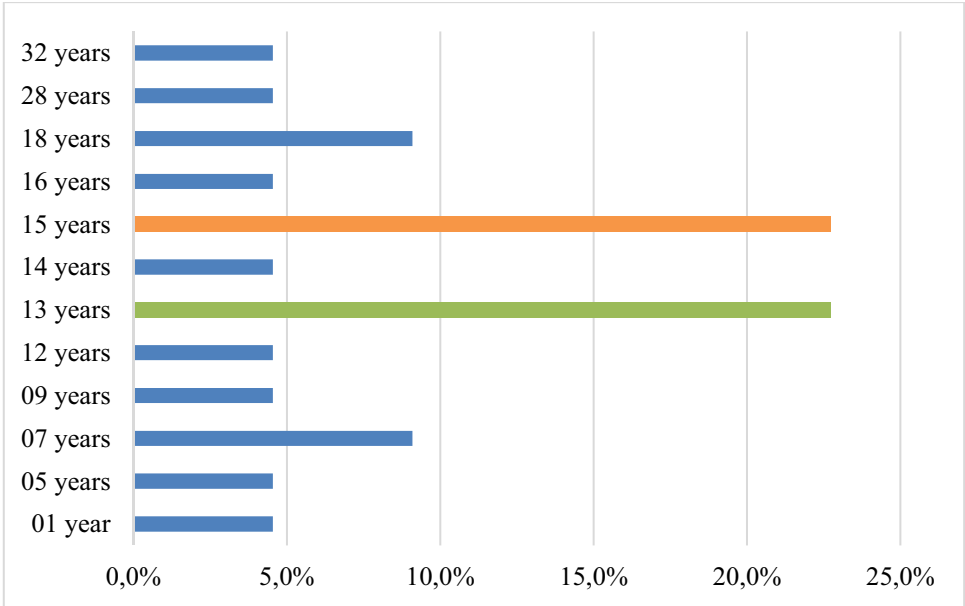

Figure 1. Time Working at the University

Regarding the areas of training at the doctoral level, 77.27% of the professor have a doctorate degree. According to the classification of areas by CAPES, the area of Applied Social Sciences corresponds to the area with more doctoral degrees with 76%, followed by Human

Sciences accounting for 18%. While the area of Exact, Technological and Multidisciplinary Sciences 6% of titles.

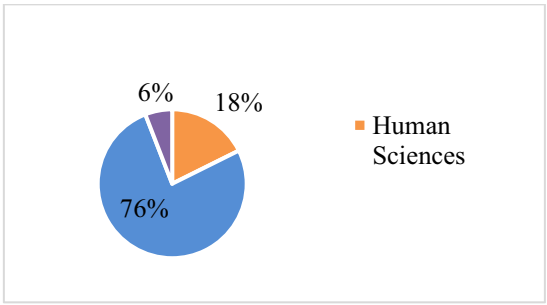

Figure 2. Areas of Doctorate Focus.

When analyzing the data regarding the publications of teachers, it was found that in the total period analyzed 102 scientific productions were published. The years with the most productions occurred in the years 2020 and 2021, with 28 and 31 publications, respectively, being 2021 the year with the most emphasis. After this period, there was a decrease in the number of publications, 2023 presented the year with the lowest production drop with 11 publications.

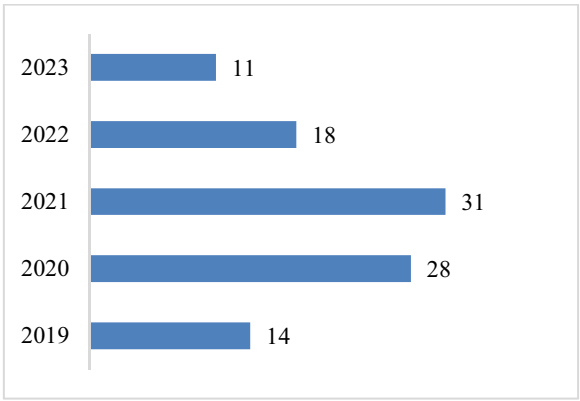

Figure 3. Number of Publications in the Scientific Journals 2019 – 2023.

In relation to scientific journals, most academic productions are concentrated in journals with higher classifications of the Qualis system. The journals classified in stratum A3, with 35 publications, followed by stratum A4, with 21, then Qualis B1, with 16. Stratum B4 did not record any publication during the period analyzed.

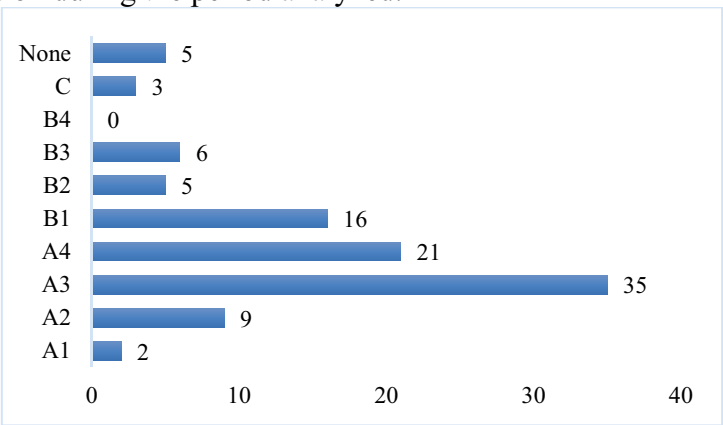

Figure 4. Number of Publications by Qualis CAPES Journal (2019 - 2023).

Most of the professors' scientific productions were in journals classified as A3 and A4 by Qualis CAPES. In the chart, Qualis A3, especially, was particularly evident between the years 2019, 2020 and 2022 of the analyzed period.

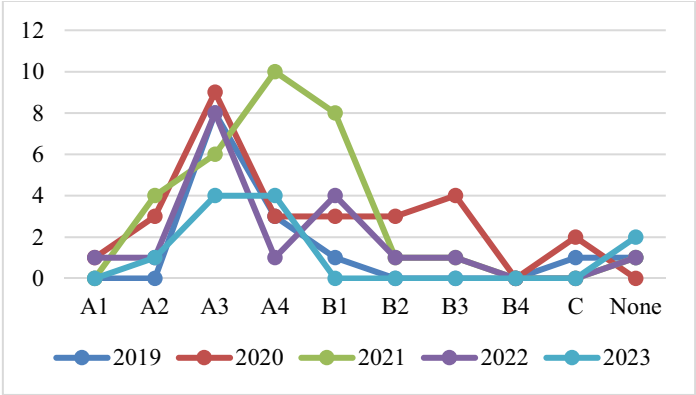

Figure 5. Qualis CAPES Classification of the Scientific Journals of the Professors' Publications (2019 - 2023).

The scientific productions of the professors were published in 57 scientific journals. It was identified that the national journals concentrated the largest number of publications, with emphasis on the *Revista Brasileira de Pesquisa em Turismo* (Qualis Capes A3), with twelve publications, *Estudios Y Perspectivas En Turismo* (Qualis Capes A3), from Argentina, *Revista Turismo Em Análise* (Qualis Capes A4), *Rosa dos Ventos* (Qualis Capes B1), each with six publications, plus the journal *Turismo & Ação* (Qualis Capes A3) with four publications. In relation to the language of publications, most of the research was published in Portuguese, and only 18.6% of the studies were published in English and 5.9% in Spanish, being important the expansion of publications in other languages for a greater reach and impact.

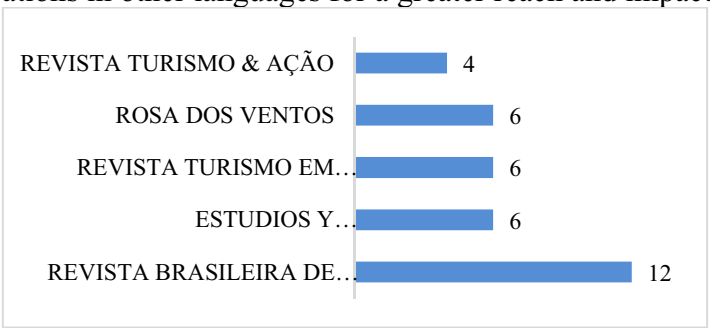

Figure 6. *Journal with More Publications of the Professors' Articles (2019 – 2023).*

Regarding the research areas, it was found that tourism represented 55% of publications, followed by productions from areas related to other areas with 32%, and the hotel industry had the lowest number of publications with 13%. These data confirm the emphasis on the interdisciplinarity of studies in tourism and hotel industry.

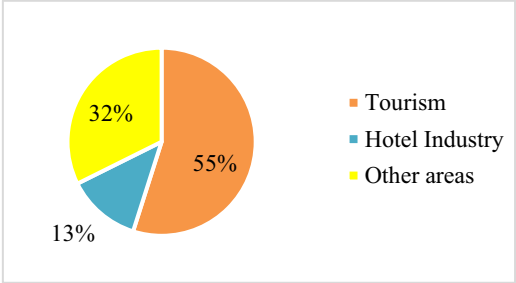

Figure 7. Areas of Study Published by the Professors 2019 – 2023

As for the methodology adopted in the research, the exploratory approach was the most applied by the professors with 69%, followed by the descriptive approach with 31% of the research. There were no studies using the explanatory approach in the professors' publications. For data collection, the researchers used interviews (20.98%), bibliographic surveys (18.51%) and questionnaires (17.90%). Case studies and multiple case studies were also developed.

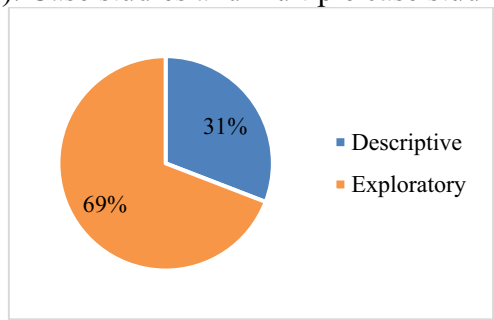

Figure 8. Methodologies Used in the Published Articles 2019 – 2023

Inter-institutional partnerships, which are collaborations carried out jointly with other universities or institutions were also raised in the study and, according to the data, there were 36 collaborations between the university studied and other institutions in different regions of the country. The interinstitutional partnerships with the largest number are: UESPI and UFPR, with 5 collaborations each, followed by UFRN and USP with 4 participations each and IFMT with 3 participation records. The data show the marked number of partnerships between university faculty in the Northeast region with 52%, followed by the Southeast and South regions with 19% each.

Table 1. Key inter-institutional partnerships

Region	State	Partnership	Frequency	Percentage
Northeast	Rio Grande do Norte	UFRN	4	13%
		UFERSA	1	3%
	Piauí	UESPI	5	16%
	Bahia	UFOB	3	10%
	Ceará	UFC	2	6%
	Sergipe	UFAL	1	3%
Southeast	São Paulo	USP	4	13%
		UFSCar	2	6%
South	Paraná	UFPR	5	16%
	Rio Grande do Sul	UCS	1	3%
Midwest	Mato Grosso	IFMT	3	10%
Total			36	100%

CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to analyze the publications of professors who are part of the Department of Tourism and Hotel Industry of the Federal University of the Northeast of Brazil. It was found that 45.4% of these teachers have been at the university for between 13 and 15 years, which shows that they have considerable experience in the institution. Furthermore, 77.27% of the professors are PhD. Most of them in the area of Applied Social Sciences, representing 76%, which is the area of concentration of courses in Management, Accounting and Tourism, related to CAPES and CNPq assessments.

In the period analyzed, the publications of teachers totaled 102 scientific articles. The area of Tourism corresponded to most of the studies of teachers with 55%, the area of hospitality obtained few productions with 13%, together these areas concentrated 68% (69 published articles) of the studies produced among teachers, but research in other areas (accounted for 32%) were also identified, demonstrating interdisciplinarity between the areas, covering other fields of study. Among the most researched topics are: Tourism, Experience, Consumption and Market, Management, Marketing and Administration and Hotel Industry, Food and Services, demonstrating a wide variety of subjects researched by the professors. Most of the research was developed based on the reality of the local context, with little research focused on the national or international sphere. The methods most used by the professors in research were exploratory and descriptive. The data on methodology allow inferring about the requirement of deepening in research. Concerning the publications, it was observed that predominantly national journals, in the Qualis CAPES A3 and A4 classifications. Although the journals are the most reputable in Brazil, as well as the language of publications, mostly in Portuguese, it supports the need for internationalization of studies in the area, which is also found when analyzing the inter-institutional partnerships considering that all the partnerships are among Brazilian universities, especially from the northeast region of the country. In this sense, it is essential to expand and strengthen partnerships for the development and consolidation of the area.

The results of the present study contribute to highlight the importance of research aimed at understanding scientific production in the area of Tourism and Hotel Industry; in this sense, more studies that can deepen knowledge on the subject should be developed, aiming to contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge in tourism and hospitality.

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BETWEEN THE SACRED AND DEVELOPMENT: RELIGIOUS TOURISM FROM A DESTINATION MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE IN RIO GRANDE DO SUL

Izabel Cristine Lopes[1], Elídio Vanzella[2]

ABSTRACT: *The importance of religious tourism is evident, as many destinations in Brazil and around the world are recognized for their monuments, sanctuaries, and pilgrimage sites. This phenomenon provides a distinctive context for analysis. This study examines the main expressions of religious tourism in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach, based on bibliographic and documentary sources. Several cases were analyzed, including the well-established "Caminho das Missões" (Mission Trail) and the emerging "Cristo Protetor de Encantado" (Protector Christ of Encantado) complex, contrasted with long-standing religious manifestations such as the "Romaria de São Miguel" (Pilgrimage of Saint Michael) in Passo Fundo. The findings indicate that the success of these destinations lies not only in their religious symbolism but also in effective governance involving public authorities and private stakeholders. Such collaboration contributes to transforming sacred sites into drivers of social visibility and regional economic dynamism.*

KEYWORDS: *Tourism; Pilgrimage; Religious; Management; Destinations.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism in Brazil has grown significantly in recent years, becoming an important component of the national tourism economy. The sector generates approximately R$15 billion annually (Brasil, 2023). Based on 2019 data from the International Tourism Demand Survey and the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNAD), the Ministry of Tourism estimated that religion motivated 0.8% of international trips to Brazil, while "religion or pilgrimage" accounted for 2.9% of domestic travel. This phenomenon has been stimulated by the construction of new monuments, temples, and religious shrines across the country (Brasil, 2025).

Currently, this segment attracts approximately 17.7 million travelers each year in Brazil (Brasil, 2025). This flow supports regional economies, generating employment in hospitality, gastronomy, and the sale of religious goods. According to the National Confederation of Municipalities, religious tourism mobilizes millions of visitors across Brazilian municipalities every year. Religious pilgrimages also stimulate cultural tourism and represent about 12% of activity in this segment. The construction of large religious complexes capable of hosting thousands of devotees during a single event has contributed to the emergence of new pilgrimage destinations in several municipalities. Examples include the recently inaugurated evangelical Temple of Solomon in São Paulo, the Catholic Sanctuary Mãe de Deus in São Paulo, and the Chico Xavier Memorial in Minas Gerais, the latter still under construction. These new sites are expected to join well-established destinations such as the Basilica of Aparecida, which can accommodate up to 35,000 people indoors and as many as 300,000 in outdoor areas during major celebrations. At the Basilica alone, the number of visitors increased by 9% between 2011 and 2013 (CNM, 2024). Table 1 presents the main religious destinations in Brazil.

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Table 1: Main religious' destinations in Brazil

Destination	State	Visitors/Year (approx.)	Key Reference
Aparecida	SP	12 million	Largest Marian shrine in the world.
Juazeiro do Norte	CE	2,5 millions	Pilgrimages of Padre Cícero.
Belém	PA	2,5 millions	Círio de Nazaré (the largest Catholic procession in the world).
Nova Trento	SC	840,000	Shrine of Santa Paulina.
Trindade	GO	1,5 million	Pilgrimage to the SanctuaryDivine Eternal Father.

Source: Ministry of Tourism (2025)

Religious tourism is not only a devotional manifestation but also a powerful driver of regional development, capable of generating employment, income, and new business opportunities at the municipal and state levels. In this context, this study analyzes the main expressions of religious tourism in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN RIO GRANDE DO SUL

Rio Grande do Sul has one of the most diverse and well-structured religious tourism contexts in Brazil. According to Steil (2024), Catholicism in the state has a history of almost five centuries and is deeplyertwined with its social and political development, providing the symbolic and discursive resources for interpreting this historical trajectory and sustaining collective memory.

The state combines the heritage of European colonization and Jesuit missions with new pilgrimage centers that attract millions of visitors each year.

Among the main destinations are the Buddhist Temple of Três Coroas, located in the Paranhana Valley; the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Caravaggio in Farroupilha, in the Serra Gaúcha region; and the Cristo Protetor of Encantado in the Taquari Valley. Visitors to these sites can be divided into two groups: practicing religious visitors seeking to strengthen their faith, and visitors motivated by esoteric or spiritual interests who seek personal or energetic renewal (SETUR, 2026).

Analyses of real-time indicators provided by the Rio Grande do Sul Tourism Observatory (SETUR, 2024) support the argument that religious tourism functions as a catalyst for economic stability, mitigating the effects of seasonality in small and medium-sized municipalities.

Pilgrimages constitute important religious events that bring together thousands of participants each year. In the northern region of Rio Grande do Sul, the Pilgrimage of Saint Michael in the municipality of Passo Fundo is the oldest of these manifestations. Aguiar (2021) examined the organization, development, and significance of the Pilgrimage of Saint Michael for the municipality, noting that its origins date back to the end of the Paraguayan War. At that time, an enslaved man who had fought in the conflict was returning home wounded and having lost one of his legs. During his journey, he found a wooden carving of Saint Michael and vowed to build a chapel in honor of the archangel if he managed to reach Passo Fundo safely. After fulfilling this promise, families began organizing pilgrimages in memory of the episode, a tradition that marked its 155th anniversary in 2026. In 2023, the pilgrimage attracted more than 10,000 participants, highlighting the strength of popular Catholicism as an element of social cohesion and local identity in the municipality of Passo Fundo. The city also hosts the Pilgrimage of Our Lady of Aparecida, organized by the Archdiocese and currently in its 44th

edition. This event has consolidated itself as one of the most important expressions of popular religiosity in northern Rio Grande do Sul and as the second-largest celebration dedicated to Brazil's patron saint (Arquidiocese de Passo Fundo, 2024).

The event is held annually on October 12 and mobilizes more than 100,000 pilgrims, supported by over 300 volunteers, demonstrating a strong capacity for community organization. In addition to its spiritual dimension, the pilgrimage also functions as an important driver of the regional solidarity economy through the "Solidarity Social Actions Exhibition," which brings together more than 40 groups of artisans and local producers at the sanctuary, integrating faith with socioeconomic development and the preservation of traditional knowledge (Mistura, 2025).

In the mountainous region, Silva (2015) argues that the strength of the Pilgrimage of Our Lady of Caravaggio in Farroupilha, whose 147th edition will take place in 2026, lies in its ability to connect the collective memory of immigration with contemporary demands for meaning and belonging, transforming the act of walking into a performance of identity and cultural resistance.

Further northwest, the Caminho das Missões emerges as an important pilgrimage route connecting several municipalities in the Missionary Region. The route has been the subject of recent studies on the "walking tourist" (Steil, 2024); (Alves, 2007); (Rodrigues, 2018).

Beyond the dimension of faith, Scherer, Schroeder, and Botelho (2024) emphasize the role of the Ruins of São Miguel in the development of the Missions Region, which hosts the only UNESCO World Heritage Site in southern Brazil. The first pilgrimage walk took place on August 17, 2001, and the route was designed to cross part of the territory once occupied by the Jesuit–Guarani society during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The itinerary allows visitors to explore heritage sites associated with the development of the Jesuit Guarani reductions, including locations that highlight contemporary regional culture as well as places of mystical significance and the aspiration to symbolically unite the "30 Peoples of the Missions" (Caminho das Missões, 2024).

The Caminho das Missões was inspired by the Camino de Santiago de Compostela and is a tourism product managed by a private company. It offers walking routes, cycling tourism, and trail itineraries that can reach up to 800 km, including an international route crossing Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil.

Scherer, Fernandes, and Alves (2011) describe this route as a space for self-knowledge and sustainable tourism, where economic benefits are distributed among small rural properties and family-run inns, thereby promoting regional development. According to the authors, tourism along the Caminho das Missões enables local culture and religiosity to be re-signified, transforming historical heritage into a form of symbolic and spiritual consumption while offering walkers an experience of introspection and contact with missionary mysticism. In 2026, the Jesuit–Guarani Caminho das Missões will celebrate its 400th anniversary.

In the Taquari Valley stands the Cristo Protetor of Encantado, inaugurated on April 6, 2025, which has attracted large crowds. The statue of Cristo Protetor is a monument representing Jesus Christ with open arms, located in the municipality of Encantado, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (AACE, 2026).

The conception and execution of the Cristo Protetor of Encantado monument are attributed to the Associação Amigos de Cristo de Encantado (AACE), a nonprofit organization composed exclusively of volunteers. Founded in 2019, the association is responsible for fundraising and for the structural management of the project. The trajectory of the monument reflects the synergy among families, religious leaders, and the business sector, with the dual objective of expressing local religiosity and promoting regional tourism development.

Construction began in July 2019 on Morro das Antenas, a site of historical relevance because it served as a source of lighting and progress for the municipality during the 1930s, on land made available through donation (PME, 2022); (AACE, 2026). By 2025, according to data from the association, the monument had already received more than 600,000 visitors from 74 different countries (AACE, 2026).

The state has also invested in religious monuments, and a project is planned for the construction of the "Largest Cross in the World," which will stand 97 meters high. The structure will be built in Antônio Carlos Gomes Nunes Municipal Park in the municipality of Cruz Alta. The cornerstone ceremony took place on October 14, 2023, and according to the project's proponents, the cross is intended to serve as both a religious and tourist landmark for Cruz Alta, attracting visitors from around the world (CM Cruz Alta, 2026); (Haesbaert, 2024).

Table 2 identifies the main religious destinations in Rio Grande do Sul based on the literature reviewed.

Table 2: Main Religious Destinations in Rio Grande do Sul

Destination	City	Main Characteristic	Reference
Santuário de Caravaggio	Farroupilha	Largest sanctuary in Southern Brazil in terms of pilgrim flow	(Schvarstzhaupt & Herédia, 2019)
Ruínas de São Miguel	São Miguel das Missões	UNESCO World Heritage Site	(Pessôa, 2006)
Khadro Ling	Três Coroas	Tibetan Buddhism	(Martins & Wingert, 2019)
Caminho das Missões	Região Missioneira	Long-distance pilgrimage route	(Scherer, Fernandes e Alves, 2011)
Cristo Protetor	Vale do Taquari	Largest Christ monument in Brazil	(Giumbelli & Lima, 2023)

Author's own elaboration (2026).

The analysis of indicators produced by the State Department of Tourism supports the argument that religious tourism serves as a catalyst for economic stability, mitigating the effects of seasonality in small and medium-sized municipalities within the state. Furthermore, it has contributed to development and improvements in infrastructure to accommodate tourist flows.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

To conduct this study, a qualitative approach of an exploratory and descriptive nature was adopted, based on bibliographic and documentary research.

The central methodological procedure consisted of documentary analysis focusing on market intelligence bulletins and official demographic data, combined with bibliographic research to develop the theoretical framework. This framework was structured through the analysis of national scientific journals addressing destination management and the heritage trajectory of the sacred.

In addition, secondary data were collected from institutional sources such as the Ministry of Tourism, SEBRAE, and the Rio Grande do Sul Tourism Observatory. Data processing was conducted through comparative analysis among different territorial management models, aiming to examine the alignment between public policy guidelines, municipal development indicators, and the sector's operational practices.

The analysis of institutional documents followed the guidelines proposed by Cellard

(2008), who recommends a critical reading based on five dimensions: context, authorship, authenticity, nature, and internal logic. According to the author, documents should be understood as forms of social testimony, enabling researchers to extract meanings that contribute to understanding the phenomenon under study beyond the surface of the text.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of religious tourism in Brazil, with particular attention to the Southern region, reveals a phenomenon that extends beyond the dimension of faith, establishing itself as a complex system of territorial management and regional development. The study shows that the production of religious territory results from a persistent tension between devotional mysticism and market dynamics. As evidenced by Sartori (2025) in the case of Nova Trento, and by Scherer, Schroeder, and Botelho (2024) in the Missions region, the successful management of these destinations depends on the ability to integrate the local production chain, from family farming to the hospitality sector, while preserving the authenticity of the tangible and intangible heritage that attracts pilgrims.

The operationalization of tourism in the northwestern region of Rio Grande do Sul requires institutional coordination that transcends municipal boundaries. The provision of technical resources, such as the mapping of the pilgrimage circuit conducted by the Association of Municipalities of the Missions (2024), materializes the regional development guidelines proposed by Schroeder and Botelho (2024), ensuring the infrastructure necessary to support the journey of the contemporary pilgrim.

It can be concluded that religious tourism in Rio Grande do Sul, supported by structuring public policies such as those of SETUR (2024) and monitored through precise data tools, holds significant potential for sustainable growth. For this segment to continue serving as a socioeconomic catalyst, it is essential that the management of businesses and destinations prioritize collaborative governance. The balance between the "faithful devotee" and the "tourist" determines the longevity of these destinations, transforming spirituality into a source of cultural wealth and regional prosperity for the communities involved.

The authors' considerations regarding religious tourism in Brazil indicate it is a multidimensional phenomenon that requires balanced management between the preservation of the sacred and socioeconomic development. Scherer, Schroeder and Botelho (2024), and Sartori (2025) emphasize that the success of destinations such as the Caminho das Missões and the Sanctuary of Santa Paulina lies in their ability to integrate local communities while preserving the "mystique" of the place, thereby preventing the purely commercial logic of mass tourism from altering the character of the territory

Ultimately, religious tourism reaches its full potential as a driver of development only when governance harmonizes the spiritual experience of the faithful with tangible improvements in the quality of life of the local community.

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MEDICAL TOURISM IN SLOVENIA - RECOVERY AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE POST-COVID ERA

Barbara Urh[1]

***ABSTRACT**: Medical tourism has become an increasingly significant segment of the global tourism industry, combining healthcare services with international travel. The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted international mobility and cross-border healthcare services, resulting in a sharp decline in medical and wellness tourism worldwide. This paper examines the recovery of medical tourism in Slovenia in the post-pandemic period and evaluates the country's competitive position within the European health tourism market. The analysis is based on official tourism statistics, policy documents, and international market reports. Particular attention is devoted to Slovenian health-spa municipalities, which represent a long-standing pillar of national tourism and combine natural therapeutic resources with modern medical and rehabilitation services. The results indicate that Slovenia's health-spa tourism experienced a relatively rapid recovery following the pandemic. By 2023, spa municipalities recorded approximately 3.17 million overnight stays, reflecting renewed demand for rehabilitative and preventive travel. The balanced structure of domestic and international visitors suggests that Slovenian health resorts function both as national healthcare-tourism facilities and as internationally attractive destinations. The case of Rogaška Slatina illustrates how historically established spa destinations have adapted to post-pandemic demand for preventive, rehabilitative and wellness-oriented services. The findings suggest that Slovenia possesses considerable potential to strengthen its position within European medical tourism through targeted international promotion, the development of specialised medical-wellness products and further integration of digital health services.*

***KEYWORDS**: medical tourism; health tourism; Slovenia; spa tourism; post-COVID recovery*

INTRODUCTION

Medical tourism refers to travel undertaken with the primary purpose of obtaining medical treatment, rehabilitation or other health-related services outside one's usual place of residence (Connell, 2013). Within the broader framework of health tourism, this may include complex clinical procedures, rehabilitation therapies, preventive care or wellness-oriented services (UNWTO & European Travel Commission, 2018).

Over the past two decades, health-related travel has developed into an important component of the global tourism economy. A combination of demographic changes, rising healthcare costs and growing patient mobility has encouraged increasing numbers of people to seek treatment abroad. At the same time, tourism destinations have recognised the economic potential of integrating healthcare services with tourism infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted both tourism flows and international healthcare mobility. During 2020 and 2021 global travel declined sharply, while many hospitals postponed elective procedures and restricted access for international patients. However, once travel restrictions were lifted, demand for medical and wellness tourism began to recover relatively quickly (OECD, 2023; UNWTO, 2024).

Countries with reliable healthcare systems, well-developed wellness infrastructure and high safety standards appear particularly well positioned to benefit from this recovery. Slovenia belongs to this group of destinations. The country combines natural healing resources, a long tradition of spa tourism and modern rehabilitation facilities with relatively easy accessibility for European visitors.

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The aim of this paper is therefore to analyse the recovery of medical tourism in Slovenia in the post-COVID period and to evaluate the country's development opportunities within the broader European health tourism market.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive and exploratory research design based primarily on secondary data sources. Several types of information were analysed in order to evaluate recent trends in Slovenian medical tourism.

First, official tourism statistics from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS) were examined. Data on tourist arrivals and overnight stays in health-spa municipalities were used as an approximate indicator of health-related tourism demand.

Second, international reports and market analyses were reviewed in order to contextualise Slovenian tourism trends within broader global developments in the medical tourism sector.

Third, academic literature and policy documents were analysed to identify key factors that influence medical tourism demand, including price differences between healthcare systems, waiting times for medical procedures and perceptions of service quality.

This combination of statistical analysis and literature review allows the study to interpret the development of Slovenian health tourism and to identify potential strategic opportunities for the future.

RESULTS

Global medical tourism has expanded significantly in recent decades. Market analyses suggest that the sector will continue growing rapidly in the coming years due to demographic ageing, rising healthcare costs and increasing cross-border mobility of patients (Precedence Research, 2025).

Within Europe, medical tourism tends to focus more on quality, safety and rehabilitation services rather than purely cost-driven treatment travel (Smith & Puczkó, 2014). Slovenia's tourism structure reflects these characteristics.

Health-spa municipalities represent an important component of Slovenian tourism. Before the COVID-19 pandemic they accounted for approximately one quarter of all overnight stays in the country.

Although the pandemic caused a temporary decline in tourism demand, the sector recovered relatively quickly once travel restrictions were lifted. By 2023 health-spa municipalities recorded approximately 3.17 million overnight stays, including around 1.76 million domestic and 1.40 million foreign overnight stays (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024).

This relatively balanced structure suggests that Slovenian spa resorts perform a dual function. On the one hand they serve as destinations for domestic visitors seeking rehabilitation and preventive health services. On the other hand, they attract a substantial number of international tourists, particularly from neighbouring European countries such as Austria, Germany, Italy and Hungary.

At the national level Slovenia recorded 16.1 million overnight stays in 2023, exceeding pre-pandemic tourism levels (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024). The rapid recovery of overall tourism has therefore created favourable conditions for the continued development of health-related travel.

DISCUSSION

A growing body of literature emphasises several factors that influence medical tourism demand. One of the most widely discussed drivers is the difference in healthcare costs between countries. Patients from high-cost healthcare systems may seek treatment abroad in order to reduce expenses (Connell, 2013).

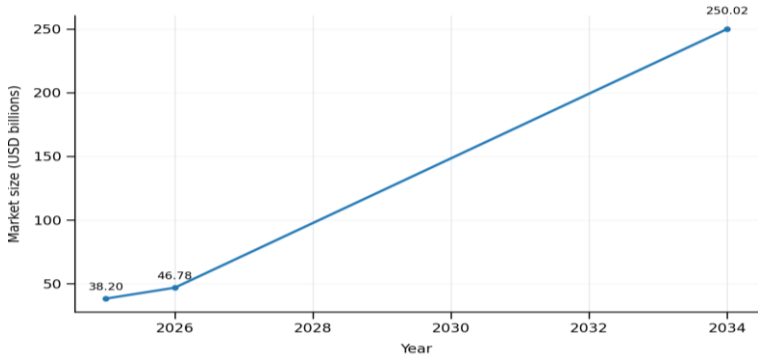

Figure 1. Global medical tourism market growth (2025–2034).
Source: Fortune Business Insights (2026).

Waiting times for medical procedures represent another important factor. In countries where access to certain treatments is limited or delayed, cross-border healthcare may offer a faster alternative (Hanefeld et al., 2015).

However, cost is not the only consideration. Patients also pay considerable attention to the quality and safety of medical services. Accreditation of healthcare facilities, professional reputation of medical staff and transparent information about treatment outcomes can significantly influence destination choice (OECD, 2023).

Cultural and linguistic factors may also play a role. Patients often prefer destinations where communication with medical professionals is relatively easy and where cultural expectations are familiar (Smith & Puczkó, 2014).

Within this context Slovenia benefits from several characteristics that support the development of medical tourism. The country offers certified natural healing resources, well-established rehabilitation facilities and comparatively affordable services relative to Western European healthcare systems (Slovenian Tourist Board, 2024).

Geographical proximity to major European markets also facilitates travel for short-term medical or rehabilitation stays. Slovenia's compact size and well-developed transport infrastructure enable relatively easy access to spa destinations.

Digital technologies are increasingly shaping the organisation of international healthcare services. Telemedicine, electronic medical records and remote consultations allow patients to communicate with healthcare providers before travelling and to maintain contact after treatment.

These developments may significantly improve continuity of care, which is often considered one of the main challenges in medical tourism (OECD, 2023). Through online consultations physicians can evaluate medical documentation, provide initial diagnoses and recommend appropriate treatments before patients arrive at the destination.

For tourism destinations, digitalisation can also reduce uncertainty for potential visitors. Transparent online information about treatment options, costs and expected outcomes helps patients make more informed decisions.

Slovenia has identified digital transformation of healthcare as a strategic priority. The integration of digital health services with tourism infrastructure may therefore represent an

important competitive advantage in the future development of medical tourism.

Sustainability has become a central principle in contemporary tourism development. Health tourism is often considered particularly compatible with sustainable tourism strategies because it typically involves longer stays, higher-value services and smaller visitor volumes compared to mass tourism (Smith & Puczkó, 2014).

Slovenia's tourism strategy emphasises green and boutique tourism development. Health resorts and spa municipalities fit well within this framework, as they are often located in natural environments and rely on natural therapeutic resources such as thermal water and mineral springs.

By combining healthcare services with sustainable tourism principles Slovenia may strengthen its reputation as a high-quality destination for preventive and rehabilitative travel. This approach may also contribute to regional economic development and help reduce seasonal fluctuations in tourism demand.

The demand structure of Slovenian health tourism shows a relatively balanced composition between domestic and foreign visitors. While domestic guests constitute a slightly larger share, international visitors account for nearly half of total stays.

This distribution indicates that health resorts function both as national healthcare-tourism facilities and as internationally competitive destinations (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024; Slovenian Tourist Board, 2024).

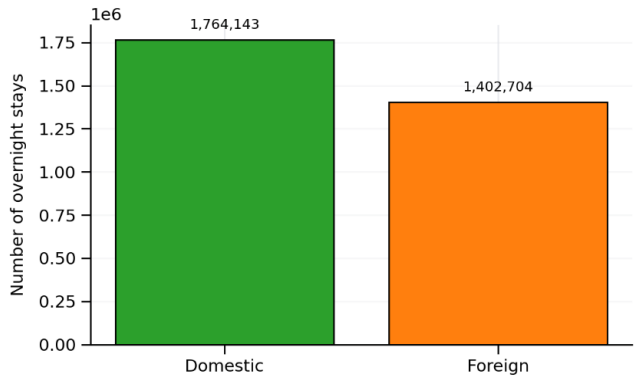

Figure 2. Overnight stays in health (spa) municipalities, Slovenia, 2023
Source: STO, Tourism in Numbers 2023 (SURS data).

In Slovenian terminology, the concepts zdravstveni turizem (health tourism) and medicinski turizem (medical tourism) are widely used, although the distinction between them is not always clearly defined. In international literature, health tourism is generally understood as an umbrella concept that includes both medical tourism and wellness tourism (Mainil et al., 2017).

Medical tourism typically refers to travel motivated by clinical procedures such as surgery, diagnostics or specialised rehabilitation treatments. Wellness tourism, on the other hand, focuses primarily on preventive health, relaxation and lifestyle improvement (Smith & Puczkó, 2014). In practice, many destinations combine both forms within integrated spa and health-resort environments.

Slovenia has a particularly long tradition of spa tourism based on natural healing factors such as thermal water, mineral water and favourable climatic conditions. Several spa destinations have operated continuously for centuries. Dobrna, for example, is often described as the oldest Slovenian thermal spa, with historical references dating back to the early fifteenth century.

Today Slovenia's health tourism sector includes thermal spas, rehabilitation centres, wellness facilities and specialised medical clinics. National tourism strategies increasingly emphasise health and wellbeing tourism as a high-value and sustainable segment of the tourism industry (Slovenian Tourist Board, 2024).

Education and professional training also contribute to the development of this sector. The College of Management in Bled offers a specialised Health Tourism study programme that integrates tourism management and healthcare knowledge (Visoka šola za management Bled, 2024).

As an example of post-COVID recovery this paper puts forward the case of Rogaška Slatina which represents one of the most historically significant health-spa destinations in Slovenia. The town has attracted visitors for centuries due to its mineral springs and therapeutic traditions (Smith & Puczkó, 2014).

Today the Rogaška Medical Centre provides specialised diagnostic, preventive and rehabilitation programmes that combine natural healing factors with modern medical technologies (Rogaška Medical, 2024). The mineral water Donat Mg, originating from this region, has gained international recognition and is widely associated with digestive and mineral-balance benefits (Atlantic Grupa, 2023).

Following the pandemic, tourism activity in Rogaška Slatina gradually recovered as travel restrictions were lifted. By 2023 visitor numbers had returned to approximately pre-pandemic levels (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024).

This recovery illustrates the resilience of Slovenia's spa-based health tourism model and demonstrates the continuing relevance of traditional therapeutic destinations within the modern medical tourism market.

CONCLUSION

Medical tourism in Slovenia has demonstrated a relatively strong recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly within the country's health-spa municipalities. Statistical data indicate that demand for rehabilitative, preventive and wellness-oriented travel has increased again since the restoration of international mobility.

Slovenia's long tradition of spa tourism, combined with modern rehabilitation services and natural healing resources, provides a solid foundation for further development in the medical tourism sector. The balanced structure of domestic and international visitors also contributes to the stability of the sector.

Future competitiveness will depend on several strategic factors, including stronger international promotion, development of specialised medical-wellness products and improved integration with European cross-border healthcare systems.

Slovenia should prioritize digital health technologies and sustainable tourism strategies as they may play an increasingly important role in shaping the future development of health tourism in Slovenia. If these opportunities are effectively utilised, Slovenia has the potential to strengthen its position as a specialised European destination for preventive, rehabilitative and medical tourism.

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TOURISM AND CINEMA: BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST THREE DECADES OF SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION

Priscila Fernandes Carvalho de Melo[1], Nathália Korossy[2]

ABSTRACT: *Film tourism has been attracting the interest of researchers in academia due to evidence of this phenomenon in destinations such as New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and South Korea, thus creating a need to understand international scientific developments on this topic. Therefore, the objective of this research was to analyze international scientific production involving film tourism, covering the period from 1990 to 2019. The time frame is justified by integrating research that began in a master's thesis, which systematized international scientific production on the topic, allowing for a longitudinal analysis over three decades and ensuring methodological consistency in the present study. To achieve the proposed objective, exploratory-descriptive research was adopted, making use of bibliometric study, through the application of the three laws: Lotka, Bradford, and Zipf in 129 articles in English published in 56 international journals. In addition to the quantitative data, it was possible to observe that the literature on film tourism shows positive growth, albeit not linear, and that, as most studies on this topic deal with demand, there is a theoretical gap in studies that discuss supply and residents' perceptions.*

KEYWORDS: *Tourism and cinema; Bibliometric study; Lotka; Bradford; Zipf.*

INTRODUCTION

Film tourism, according to Hudson and Ritchie (2006), is a niche in tourism whose main motivation is visiting destinations or attractions related to certain audiovisual productions, mainly films produced for cinema and television series, encouraging the desire to visit film locations and enjoy new experiences.

In order to conduct a survey of international production on film tourism, we observed the need to understand the evolution of scientific production in the first three decades of scientific study and identify possible gaps in studies involving this theme.

Thus, the objective of this research was to conduct a survey of scientific production involving international film tourism, covering the period from 1990 to 2019, thus contemplating the first scientific works on film tourism, as well as reflecting, relating, and contrasting the data obtained between academic productions to understand the possible paths and research opportunities revealed by the analysis.

This research is an excerpt from the master's thesis, developed and supervised by the respective authors, which addresses the integrative systematic review that supports the number of international articles and journals used in this bibliometric study.

It should be noted that this study is part of an investigative trajectory that began with in-depth research in the master's thesis, which expanded and systematized the survey of international scientific production on film tourism. The time frame between 1990 and 2019 was established within the scope of this investigation, allowing for a consistent longitudinal analysis of the development of the field over three decades. Thus, this article is a specific offshoot of this broader research, maintaining the time frame originally defined to ensure methodological consistency.

It should also be noted that the theme has been developed by the authors, including a thesis defended in 2025, which demonstrates the continuity and deepening of the research

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agenda in the field of film tourism.

METHODOLOGY

This research is exploratory-descriptive in nature, using bibliometric analysis to quantitatively analyze international scientific production on film tourism.

The work began with a review of studies published in international journals based on an integrative literature review, adopting six stages, distributed as follows: (1) identification of the theme and selection of the research question; (2) establishment of inclusion criteria; (3) identification of pre-selected and selected studies; (4) categorization of selected studies; (5) analysis and interpretation of the results; and (6) presentation of the review/synthesis of knowledge (Botelho, Cunha, & Macedo, 2011).

To conduct the survey of scientific publications on the subject, the following descriptors were used: *film tourism, film-induced tourism, movie tourism, screen movie, movie-induced tourism, and screen tourist.* The inclusion criteria were articles written in English that contained the descriptors in the keywords or title of the scientific publications. The time frame for this research was from 1990 to 2019 to cover the first scientific works on film tourism, thus addressing the first three decades of research.

As the objective of this research is to present the scientific evolution of film tourism through a bibliometric study (Mello, Dantas & Botelho, 2017), the processes related to the integrative literature review will not be presented in depth, but rather the bibliometric study. Thus, through the data from the integrative literature review, which is part of the dissertation research, it was possible to obtain a sample of 129 articles and 56 journals for the bibliometric analysis, which was carried out based on *Lotka's* (1926) empirical laws of measuring author productivity, *Bradford's* law of scientific knowledge dispersion (1934), and *Zipf's* word distribution and frequency model (1949) (Pinheiro, 1983; Tague-Sutcliffe, 1992).

RESULTS

Lotka's law

Verifying the productivity of the main authors from direct counting, we reached a total of 101 authors, of whom 89% contributed with only one scientific production, representing 69% of the articles produced, with a total average productivity of 1.27 articles per author. From the data collected, it was observed that only a group of 12 authors were more productive, representing 31% of the articles (Table 1).

Table 1: Productivity of the main authors

No. of contributions per author	No. of authors	% of authors	No. of articles	% of articles
1	89	0.881188118	89	0.689922480
2	5	0.049504950	10	0.077519379
3	3	0.023041474	9	0.069767441
4	2	0.013824884	8	0.062015503
5	1	0.004608294	5	0.038759689
8	1	0.004608294	8	0.062015503
TOTAL	101	1	129	1

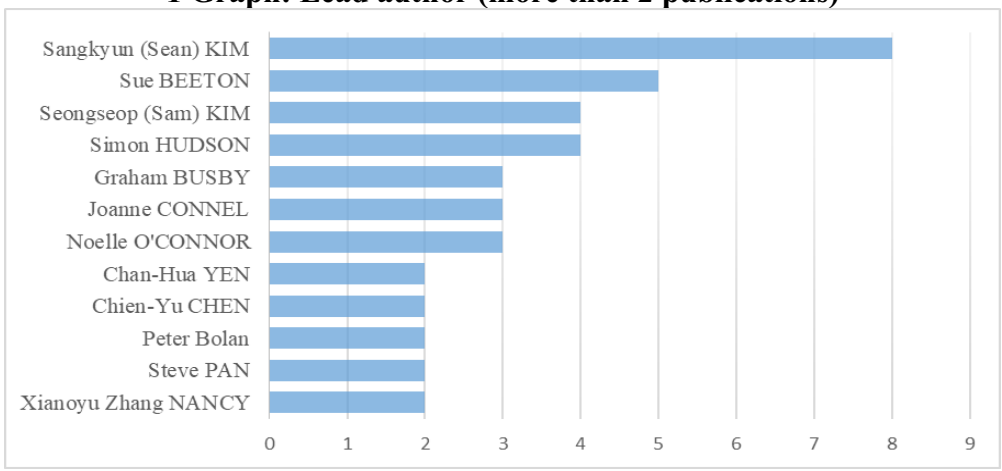
12

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Among this group of 12 authors, Sangkyun (Sean) Kim stands out with 8 publications and Sue Beeton with 5 academic publications, both as lead authors. It can be seen that

researchers are concentrated in Asian and European countries, such as China, Taiwan, England, the United Kingdom, and Ireland, but researchers from Canada and Australia also stand out (graph 1).

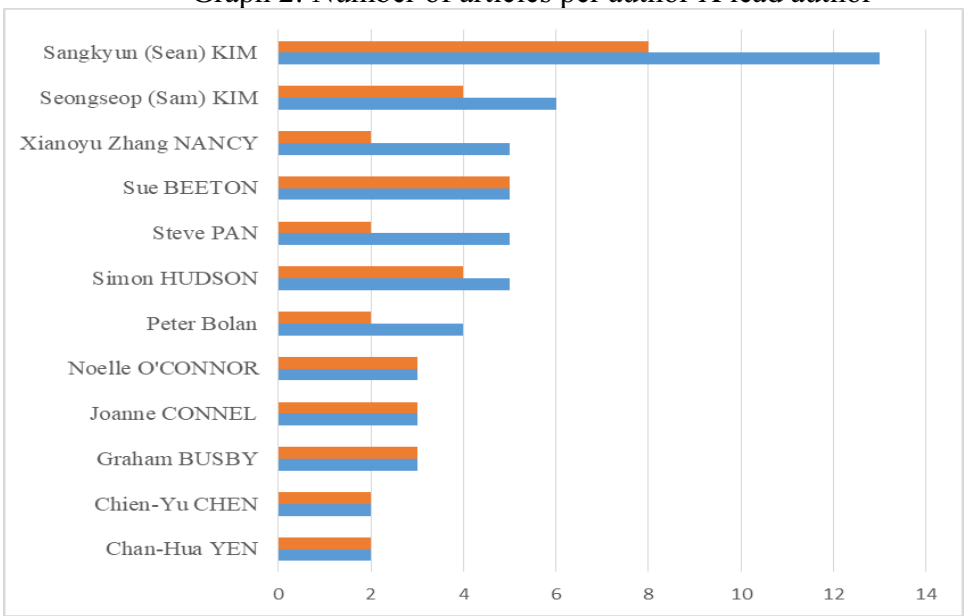
1 Graph: Lead author (more than 2 publications)



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Another relationship established based on the data obtained was the association between total production and lead author. Thus, it can be observed that Sangkyun (Sean) Kim continues to be the author with the highest number of scientific publications as well as lead author, followed by Seongseop (Sam) KIM with 6 academic publications, but only 4 of them as lead author (graph 2).

Graph 2: Number of articles per author X lead author



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

For the complete count (Table 2), including main and secondary authors, the universe

corresponds to 216 authors, of whom 87.9% published only one article, and 12.1% were responsible for a greater academic output on film tourism. Thus, it is possible to observe the discrepancy between the number of authors, 190, who published only one scientific production on film tourism and the number of authors, 26, who produced two or more scientific works addressing the aforementioned theme, proving *Lotka's* law.

2 Table: productivity through complete counting

No. of contributions per author	No. of authors	% of authors
1	190	0.879629629
2	15	0.069444444
3	5	0.023148148
4	3	0.013888888
5	1	0.004629629
6	1	0.004629629
13	1	0.004629629
	26	
TOTAL	216	1

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Thus, following the criteria adopted for this research, the basis for the bibliometric study was formed by a sample of 129 articles distributed across 56 journals. Therefore, there is a growing trend in academic production from 1990 to 2019, indicating that the correlation between the years and the productions is positive, thus presenting variations in the number of published works, with an average of 4.44 works per year. However, there was a higher output in 2015, with 21 articles published, reflecting greater activity by researchers on the topic.

Based on a more detailed analysis, and confirming what had already been mentioned, 2015 was the most productive year for research involving film tourism. However, 12 of these studies were published by the journal *Almatourism,* which has an A2 rating according to CAPES *Qualis* (new extract, 2019). Subsequently, the *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* and *Tourism Management* were the ones that presented the largest number of published articles and with a greater distribution among the years, unlike *Almatourism*, which had all its publications on film tourism in 2015, since it launched a specific call for the publication of articles involving the theme.

***Bradford's* Law**

Based on the dispersion of articles in journals, *Bradford's* law was applied to identify the most relevant journals publishing on the topic.

Analyzing the journals that contributed to the theme in order to offer important information to researchers on advances and discoveries in film tourism, it can be observed that only 7 journals have 5 or more publications on the theme and that 9 journals have between 2 and 4 publications. The remaining journals (40 journals) have only one publication each on film tourism.

Similarly, the percentage refers to the seven journals with the highest number of scientific publications on film tourism. It can be seen that 51% of the journals have fewer than five articles, i.e., between four and one publication; and that the *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, *Almatourism,* and *Tourism Management* are the ones with the highest number of scientific articles.

To identify the core and zones of journals that address the theme of film tourism, the total number of articles (129) was divided by the number of zones stipulated by *Bradford's* law,

i.e., 3, thus obtaining a total of approximately 43 articles for the core and for the other zones represented in column A*B (Table 3). It can therefore be observed that the core is composed of 3 journals, zone 1 of 10 journals, and zone 2 of 43 journals, confirming that few journals have the highest number of academic productions on the subject studied and that a large number of journals have little academic production, as shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Representation of the core and zones of *Bradford's* law

Journal (P)	Articles (A)	P + (accumulated)	A (accumulated)	A*B	
1	17	1	17	17	
2	12	3	29	24	Core
1	7	4	36	7	
3	5	7	41	15	
2	4	9	45	8	Zone 1
4	3	13	48	12	
3	2	16	50	6	
40	1	56	51	40	Zone 2

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

The *Bradford* multiplier found for the theme of film tourism was B(m) 3, which was confirmed using the mathematical formula K = (1.781 x Ym) 1/p, where **K** represents the *Bradford* multiplier, **Ym** represents the maximum productivity depicted by the first number in the column of accumulated articles, and **P** represents the number of zones (Egghe, 1986). This formula is mentioned by Egghe (1986) as a frequency method within a classification method and its results are similar.

It is also observed that the core and zone 1 represent 65% of the production on film tourism distributed across 13 journals and that 35% of the articles are allocated to 43 journals (Table 1).

Table 1: Demonstration of the *Bradford* multiplier calculation

K = (1.781 x 17) 1/3

K = 3.116767

Zones	**Number of journals**	**1:n:n²**	**Multiplier**
Core	3	1	
Zone 1	10	n	3.333333333
Zone 2	43	n²	4.3

Zones	**Quantity of periodicals**	**Number of articles**	
Core	3	41	0.32
Zone 1	10	42	0.33
Zone 2	43	46	0.35

65

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

To better demonstrate *Bradford's* law, Table 2 is organized according to *Bradford's* (1934) instructions: the first column represents the number of journals, while the second column represents the number of articles per journal. The third column is the sum of the journals represented in the first column, and the fourth column represents the cumulative number of articles.

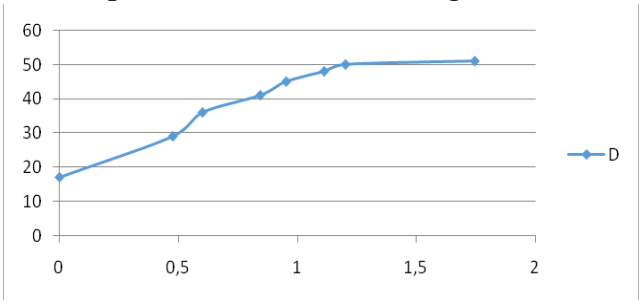
Table 2: Numerical representation of *Bradford's* law for film tourism

Journal (P)	Articles (A)	P + (accumulated)	A + (accumulated)	Ln (P+)	A*B
1	17	1	17	0	17
2	12	3	29	0.477121255	24
1	7	4	36	0.602059991	7
3	5	7	41	0.84509804	15
2	4	9	45	0.954242509	8
4	3	13	48	1.113943352	12
3	2	16	50	1.204119983	6
40	1	56	51	1.748188027	40

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Ln(P+) represents the logarithm of the third column, i.e., the accumulated number of journals, which will be represented on the graph by the X-axis, showing that the growth of accumulated articles (A+) in relation to accumulated journals (P+) approximates the *Bradford* law curve (graph 6).

Graph 6: Growth in scientific production



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Thus, based on Bradford's law, it was possible to identify the main journals that present international literature on film tourism and to verify that a small number of journals have a relevant number of articles on the subject, and that a large number of journals have low production of scientific works on the subject.

***Zipf's* law**

The third bibliometric law, *Zipf's* law, is related to word frequency, i.e., the higher the frequency, the greater its significance for the research area. Thus, using the resources of *Atlas Ti*, it was possible to identify word frequency. The *software* presented 61,844 words for analysis, from which it was possible to create a word cloud (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Word cloud

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Subsequently, through the word cloud, it was possible to identify the most frequent words, such as tourism (13,802), film (5,647), destination (4,066), tourists (2,923), locations (2,888), image (2,556), movie (1,508), screen (1,057), involvement (1,341), and management (1,226).

It can be observed, then, that the most frequently used words refer to studies involving demand. However, terms that are important for the development of film tourism, such as partnerships, actions, strategy, and management, were mentioned less frequently in the material analyzed, which in fact corroborates Tran (2015) and Di Cesare and La Salandra (2015), who argue that discussions about tourism supply are less frequent when compared to research on demand in the context of film tourism.

This statement was confirmed by the bibliometric study in this research, since of the 129 articles potentially suitable for inclusion in the review, only 41 dealt with studies on film tourism supply as their main or secondary focus. Thus, according to Connell (2012), the literature on film tourism should also turn to other areas of research, such as tourism supply, with the aim of increasing the promotion of a destination and attracting potential tourists (Buchmann, Moore, & Fisher, 2010).

It was also possible to identify the most cited academic works that discuss film tourism offerings, which provides an important information base for researchers seeking to delve deeper into this topic in order to minimize theoretical gaps on issues related to offerings within film tourism (Table 4).

Table 4: Most cited articles

ARTICLE	AUTHOR	YEAR	JOURNAL	CITATIONS	%
Promoting Destinations via Film Tourism: An Empirical Identification of Supporting Marketing Initiatives	Hudson and Ritchie	2006	*Journal of Travel Research*	683	33%
Film tourism - evolution, progress, and prospects	Connell	2012	*Tourism Management*	404	19
Film tourism and destination marketing: The case of Captain Corelli's Mandolin	Hudson and Ritchie	2006	*Journal of Vacation Marketing*	278	13
The role of image in service promotion: focusing on the influence of film on consumer choice within tourism	Bolan and Williams	2008	*International Journal of Consumer Studies*	156	7

The integration of film-induced tourism and destination branding in Yorkshire, UK	O'Connor, Flanagan, and Gilbert	2008	*International Journal of Tourism Research*	131	6
The use of film in re-imaging a tourism destination: a case study of Yorkshire	O'Connor, Flanagran, and Gilbert	2010	*Journal of Vacation Marketing*	79	4
"Film tourism: sustained economic contributions to destinations"	Croy	2011	*Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*	78	4
Location, Location, Location: Film Corporations' Social Responsibilities	Beeton	2008	*Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*	62	3
The Darcy effect: Regional tourism and costume drama	Sargent	1998	*International Journal of Heritage Studies*	54	3
The Film Producer as the Long-stay Business Tourist: Rethinking Film and Tourism from a Gold Coast	Ward and O'Regan	2009	*Perspective, Tourism Geographies: An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment*	50	2
Analyzing the Use of TV Miniseries for Korea Tourism Marketing	Lin and Huang	2008	*Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*	44	2
"Working together to leverage film tourism: collaboration between the film and tourism industries"	Hudson	2011	*Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*	43	2
Hallyu Revisited: Challenges and Opportunities for South Korean Tourism	Kim and Nam	2015	*Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*	30	2
TOTAL				**2,092**	

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to survey international scientific production on film tourism through bibliometric analysis, applying *Lotka, Bradford*, and *Zipf's* laws.

Despite the number of articles selected for this research, according to the established criteria, when diluted over the 29 years, the time frame of this research, it was possible to identify a slow growth in research on film tourism and that few authors have a more frequent production on this theme.

Thus, by applying *Lotka's* law*,* it was possible to identify the main authors who discuss film tourism, with emphasis on the authors Sangkyun (Sean) Kim with 8 publications and Sue Beeton with 5 academic publications, as the main authors. When comparing the total number of publications to the main author, it was found that Sangkyun (Sean) Kim continues to be the author with the highest number of scientific publications, followed by Seongseop (Sam) KIM with 6 academic publications.

As for *Bradford's* law, which is similar to *Lotka's* law but focused on the frequency of scientific articles in journals, it was also proven, i.e., it was found that a small number of journals (7) have more than 5 articles on film tourism, while the rest (40) have only one article. Among these journals, the most notable are: *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, *Tourism Management, and Almatourism,* with CAPES Qualis ratings *of A1, A1, and A2, respectively.*

Using *Zipf's* law, it was possible to identify that the words with the highest frequency in the articles collected discuss *tourism, film, tourists, locations, movie, screen, involvement, and management*, which are directly associated with research on demand, and that words involving tourism supply and destination management, such as partnerships, actions, strategy, and management, were mentioned less frequently. Thus, based on a more detailed analysis, it was identified that of the 129 articles collected, only 41 discussed film tourism supply, presenting a theoretical *gap* and a path for new research on the management of this activity in tourist destinations.

Based on this information, the study presents the most cited articles that discuss supply in a primary or secondary manner, with the article by Hudson and Ritchie (2006) - *Promoting Destinations via Film Tourism: An Empirical Identification of Supporting Marketing Initiatives* - being the most cited.

Thus, the study shows that the approach to film tourism has been growing in academia, but in a non-linear way, with 2015 being the most productive year, mainly due to a special call from *Almatourism.*

Based on the above, it is believed that this study generates an important information base for researchers seeking to delve deeper into this topic, since it presented, based on the bibliometric study, the seminal authors and most cited articles, the main journals that present the literature on film tourism, the words with the greatest impact in the collected works, identified based on frequency, and the theoretical gap: studies involving the supply of film tourism and/or the perception of residents. It is also worth noting that, according to O'Connor *et al.* (2008), research on film tourism involves not only demand and supply, but also the perception of residents and destination marketing, and that studying film tourism from other theoretical perspectives can help to understand how it impacts and is impacted by the various actors that surround it.

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CONVERGENCE BETWEEN CINEMA, GASTRONOMY, AND TOURISM: PROPOSAL FOR GASTRONOMIC CINEMATOGRAPHIC TOURISM AS A NICHE MARKET

Priscila Melo[1]

ABSTRACT: *Contemporary tourism seeks innovative strategies capable of diversifying tourism offerings and meeting travelers' new demands for more authentic cultural and sensory experiences. In this context, there has been growth in niche markets, notably film tourism and food tourism. Film tourism refers to trips motivated by audiovisual productions, such as films and series, which spark the public's interest in visiting the locations featured in media narratives. Gastronomic tourism, on the other hand, is related to the search for culinary experiences that allow people to learn about the culture and identity of a territory through food. From the convergence of these two fields, the possibility of developing gastronomic film tourism emerges, understood as a segment that integrates culinary experiences inspired by audiovisual productions and the food culture portrayed in films, series, and other media content. Given this scenario, this article aims to analyze the potential of gastronomic film tourism as a new tourism segment and innovation strategy in the creation of tourism products. The research is qualitative and exploratory in nature, based on a national and international literature review on film tourism, gastronomic tourism, and tourism segmentation, in addition to the conceptual systematization presented in the booklet that underpins this study. The results indicate that the integration between audiovisual and gastronomy can contribute to the creation of immersive tourism experiences, strengthening the cultural identity of destinations and increasing their competitiveness in the tourism market. It is concluded that gastronomic film tourism has the potential to consolidate itself as a strategic market niche, although there are still academic and operational gaps that require further investigation in future research.*

KEYWORDS: *Audiovisual production, Film tourism, Gastronomic tourism, Segmentation*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, tourism has established itself as one of the most important economic activities for the development of destinations, contributing to income generation, cultural appreciation, and the revitalization of local economies. However, growing competition between tourist destinations has required the creation of innovative products capable of differentiating territories and increasing the attractiveness of the experiences offered to visitors.

In this context, tourism segmentation has become a fundamental strategy for diversifying the offer and meeting the new demands of contemporary tourists. Among the emerging segments, film tourism stands out, a modality associated with visiting places that have served as locations for audiovisual productions, such as films, series, and television programs (Beeton, 2016). This phenomenon is discussed in the international literature by authors such as Beeton (2005), Hudson and Ritchie (2006), and Connell (2012), who demonstrate how the exposure of destinations in the audiovisual media can influence tourists' motivation to travel.

At the same time, gastronomic tourism has also been gaining prominence as a strategic segment, since food is an important element of cultural identity and tourist experience. According to Hall and Sharples (2003), gastronomy allows visitors to experience the destination through flavors, culinary traditions, and cultural practices associated with food.

Given these two consolidated trends, the possibility of integration between film tourism and gastronomic tourism emerges, giving rise to what can be called gastronomic film tourism (GFT). This segment proposes the creation of tourist experiences inspired by audiovisual productions that present or value culinary elements, restaurants, typical dishes, or food cultures.

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Thus, this article aims to analyze, based on the literature and conceptual systematization of the theme, the potential of gastronomic film tourism as a new tourism segment and innovation strategy in the offer of tourism products.

METHODOLOGY

The research is qualitative and exploratory in nature, based mainly on a literature review and conceptual analysis of film tourism and gastronomic tourism.

Initially, a review of national and international literature on film tourism studies was conducted, with emphasis on authors such as Beeton (2005), Hudson and Ritchie (2006), Connell (2012), and Busby and Klug (2001), who discuss the impacts of audiovisual productions on the promotion of tourist destinations. Next, contributions from the literature on gastronomic tourism were analyzed, especially the works of Hall and Sharples (2003), Richards (2012), and Bessière (1998), which address the relationship between gastronomy, culture, and tourism.

Based on this theoretical survey, a conceptual systematization was carried out to support this study, allowing its contents to be reorganized into an analytical structure focused on scientific discussion of the topic. Thus, thematic categories were identified related to: fundamental concepts of tourism; film tourism; gastronomic tourism; convergence between audiovisual and gastronomy; tourist experiences inspired by audiovisual productions.

Data analysis was performed through theoretical interpretation and conceptual articulation, seeking to understand how the integration between cinema and gastronomy can contribute to the creation of new tourism products and innovation in the sector.

RESULTS

Tourism is characterized as a complex activity that involves the movement of people, consumption of services, and interaction with different cultures and territories. In addition to its sociocultural impact, the sector has economic relevance and is considered an important driver of regional development.

However, the expansion of tourism has also intensified competition between destinations, leading to the need to diversify tourism offerings. In this scenario, market segmentation emerges as a strategy capable of identifying specific demand niches and developing products aimed at certain tourist profiles.

Among the segments that have been gaining prominence are those associated with cultural and creative experiences, in which visitors seek authentic experiences related to the identity of places.

In this sense, film tourism refers to trips motivated by films, series, or other audiovisual productions that feature certain destinations. According to Beeton (2005), this phenomenon occurs when viewers develop an interest in visiting the locations portrayed in audiovisual narratives.

Studies indicate that media exposure can significantly influence the tourist image of a destination. Hudson and Ritchie (2006) demonstrate that films and series function as powerful territorial marketing tools, promoting destinations indirectly and often more effectively than traditional promotional campaigns.

Several international destinations have consolidated promotion strategies based on this phenomenon. Locations that have served as settings for audiovisual productions often experience a significant increase in visitor flow, a phenomenon known as film-induced tourism.

Among the most emblematic cases is New Zealand, which developed a national tourism promotion strategy based on The Lord of the Rings trilogy. After the films were released, the country began promoting themed tours, visits to filming locations, and immersive

experiences related to the cinematic universe, registering a significant increase in international tourist demand (Beeton, 2005; Hudson; Ritchie, 2006).

Another example is the United Kingdom, which benefited from the popularity of productions such as Harry Potter. Film locations, such as castles, railway stations, and historic centers, became part of specialized tourist itineraries, helping to strengthen the country's image as a destination associated with fantasy and cultural heritage (Connell, 2012).

Croatia also experienced significant growth in tourist flow after serving as the setting for the Game of Thrones series. The city of Dubrovnik, for example, has become an important destination for film tourism, with the creation of guided tours that explore the locations used in the series' recordings (Reijnders, 2011; Connell, 2012).

Thus, in addition to visiting locations, film tourism can include themed experiences, film museums, festivals, guided tours, and tourism products inspired by audiovisual narratives.

At the same time, gastronomy has established itself as a central element of the contemporary tourist experience (Oliveira, 2011; Meladze, 2015). For Hall and Sharples (2003), gastronomic tourism involves the search for authentic culinary experiences that allow visitors to learn about the local culture through food.

In this context, restaurants, markets, food festivals, and culinary routes become relevant tourist attractions. Gastronomy acts as a cultural mediator, bringing visitors closer to the traditions and ways of life of the host communities.

In addition, local cuisine can strengthen identity and contribute to the economic development of regions by promoting traditional products and local production chains (Ribeiro-Martins & Silva-Martins, 2018).

The convergence between audiovisual media and gastronomy enables the creation of a new field of tourist experiences. Many audiovisual productions feature culinary elements as a fundamental part of their narratives, including iconic restaurants, traditional dishes, or specific food cultures.

In this context, gastronomic film tourism (GFT) emerges, which consists of creating tourist experiences inspired by audiovisual productions that highlight gastronomy as a central element. These experiences may include: themed restaurants inspired by films or series; recreations of dishes featured in audiovisual productions; gastronomic festivals related to cinematic narratives; tourist itineraries that combine filming locations and culinary experiences.

To understand how this convergence materializes in practice, Table 1 shows the relationships established between these pillars. As proposed by Melo (2026), the structure highlights how the connections between the different elements evolve progressively until they reach a central intersection point, where the visual narrative of the audiovisual medium articulates with the sensory experience provided by gastronomy. At this point of convergence, these components begin to act in an integrated manner, contributing to the creation of more immersive tourist experiences and the construction of a differentiated competitive advantage for tourist destinations.

Thus, when these three elements come together (audiovisual, tourism, and gastronomy), Gastronomic Cybercinematic Tourism is formed, in which each component plays a complementary role in building the tourist experience. As Melo (2026) points out, audiovisual acts as an element of attraction and inspiration, arousing public interest through visual narratives; tourism directs this interest towards travel and visiting the destination; and gastronomy provides the sensory and emotional dimension of the experience, allowing visitors to experience the "flavor of the trip."

Table 1: Relationships between tourism, gastronomy, and audiovisual media

Relationship	**Main Dynamics**	**Impact of destination**
Audiovisual + Turism	Visual Promotion and Imagination: Movies, TV series, and social media act as "showcases," transforming landscapes into objects of desire.	Scenario Effect: Increased flow of visitors seeking to personally visit the locations seen on screen (film-induced tourism).
Turism + Gastronomy	Sensory Experience: Food is no longer a support service but becomes the main attraction of the itinerary.	Identity Effect: Consolidation of gastronomic routes and festivals that differentiate the destination in the competitive market.
Audiovisual + Gastronomy	Storytelling of Flavor: Documentaries and cooking shows give voice to chefs and history to local ingredients.	Desire Effect: Viewers consume local culture even before traveling, creating an emotional connection with the cuisine.
Intersection: Audiovisual + Turism + Gastronomiy	The Contemporary Tourist Experience: The total union where tourists travel to experience the film through taste and environment.	Competitive Advantage: The destination offers a complete product (Visual + Sensory + Cultural), making it unique and difficult for competitors to imitate.

Source: Melo, 2026.

As an example, we can mention an audiovisual production that presents the wine route. In this case, the audiovisual content arouses the viewer's interest in the destination; tourism materializes this interest in the travel decision; and gastronomy manifests itself in the visitor's practical experience, such as participation in activities related to the grape harvest and dinners at local wineries. In this context, the destination no longer offers just a tourist trip but provides an integrated cultural experience, in which image, territory, and flavor combine to enrich the visitor's experience (Melo, 2026).

Thus, this integration expands the possibilities for audiovisual tourism exploration, transforming cinematic narratives into sensory experiences that involve not only the media but also the palate.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the literature shows that both film tourism and food tourism have strong potential to attract tourists when considered individually. However, their integration is still under-explored in academia and in tourism planning strategies.

Culinary film tourism represents an opportunity for innovation by combining two important dimensions of the tourist experience: audiovisual narrative and the sensory experience of food (Melo, 2026).

However, it is possible to identify a set of potentialities and challenges associated with the development of culinary film tourism as a niche market for tourist destinations.

Among the potentialities of this segment, the ability to differentiate the tourist destination stands out. The integration between cinema and gastronomy allows the creation of innovative thematic experiences, capable of attracting visitors interested in cultural and sensory experiences associated with audiovisual narratives. This combination expands the repertoire of tourism products and strengthens the competitive positioning of the destination in the market.

Another relevant aspect refers to the strengthening of local cultural identity (Ribeiro-Martins & Silva-Martins, 2018). Gastronomy represents an important cultural heritage and, when associated with audiovisual media, can gain greater visibility and appreciation. Film productions that highlight culinary practices, regional ingredients, or local restaurants contribute to projecting the food culture of a territory to wider audiences.

Gastronomic film tourism can also contribute to the economic revitalization of different sectors, including restaurants, local producers, cultural establishments, and tourist services. The creation of themed itineraries, film-inspired food festivals, and culinary experiences associated with audiovisual productions can generate new business opportunities and extend the length of visitors' stays at the destination.

In addition, this niche has the potential to strengthen territorial marketing strategies, since audiovisual media serve as a powerful means of indirectly promoting tourist destinations, influencing perceptions and motivations for travel.

However, despite its potential, the consolidation of this segment also presents some challenges. One of the main ones is the dependence on the visibility and popularity of audiovisual productions. Not all productions have a significant impact on tourist motivation, which can limit the reach of strategies based on this type of promotion.

Another challenge concerns the need for institutional coordination and integrated planning. The development of gastronomic film tourism products requires cooperation between different actors, such as public managers, the audiovisual sector, entrepreneurs in the gastronomic sector, and tourism organizations. The absence of such coordination can hinder the implementation of structured initiatives.

It is also important to consider the risk of standardization or excessive simplification of local culture if gastronomy is exploited only as a thematic element associated with audiovisual media, without due appreciation of its cultural and historical dimensions. For better visualization, see Table 2:

Table 2: Positive and negative aspects of gastronomic film tourism.

Aspects	Pontos positivos	Pontos negativos / desafios
Tourist appeal	Creates innovative experiences that combine audiovisuals and gastronomy, increasing visitors' interest in the destination.	Tourist interest may be temporary and depend on the popularity of the associated audiovisual production.
Cultural identity	It values local food culture, promoting typical dishes, regional ingredients, and culinary traditions.	There is a risk of simplification or stereotyping of gastronomic culture for commercial purposes.
Economic development	It creates opportunities for restaurants, local producers, gastronomic events, and tourist services.	It may require financial investments and adequate infrastructure to meet tourist demand.
Territorial marketing	Audiovisual media serve as a tool for indirectly promoting the destination, increasing its national and international visibility.	Not all audiovisual productions have a significant impact on tourism motivation.
Diversification of tourism offerings	Expands the destination's tourism product portfolio, integrating culture, entertainment, and gastronomy.	The lack of strategic planning can hinder the consolidation of the segment.
Sector integration	It encourages cooperation between tourism, gastronomy, culture, and the audiovisual industry.	Coordination between different institutional actors can be complex and require efficient coordination.

Source: Own elaboration based on Melo, 2026.

The implementation of this niche may require investments in tourism infrastructure, promotion, and professional training, which are not always available in all destinations. Therefore, although gastronomic film tourism has significant potential for diversification and innovation in tourism offerings, its consolidation depends on strategic planning, institutional coordination, and authentic appreciation of local food culture.

Thus, the implementation of this segment requires strategic planning and coordination between different sectors, including tourism, culture, audiovisual, and gastronomy. Cooperation between public managers, cultural producers, entrepreneurs in the gastronomic sector, and tourism organizations is essential to transform this proposal into a structured tourism product.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this article was to analyze, based on the literature and conceptual systematization of the topic, the potential of gastronomic film tourism (GFT) as a new tourism segment and as a strategy for innovation in the supply of tourism products. The analysis allowed us to understand that the convergence between audiovisual narratives and culinary experiences constitutes a promising field for the diversification and qualification of contemporary tourism offerings.

The results of the theoretical review indicate that cinema has a significant influence on the construction of the image and tourist imagination of certain destinations, acting as an important vector for territorial promotion. At the same time, gastronomy has established itself as a central element of the tourist experience, through which visitors can access the cultural, historical, and identity dimensions of territories. In this sense, the articulation between cinema and gastronomy enables the creation of more immersive tourist experiences, in which the audiovisual narrative is amplified by the sensory experience provided by food.

Based on this integration, gastronomic film tourism is a strategy capable of strengthening territorial marketing, enhancing local food culture, and expanding the possibilities for economic development. Initiatives such as themed restaurants inspired by audiovisual productions, gastronomic festivals associated with cinematic narratives, and tourist itineraries that combine filming locations and culinary experiences demonstrate the potential of this niche to stimulate local production chains and generate new business opportunities in the tourism sector.

In addition, the association between audiovisual media and gastronomy contributes to intensifying the visitor's connection with the destination, allowing tourists not only to recognize the settings seen on screen, but also to experience the flavors and cultural practices that make up the symbolic universe presented in media productions. This experiential dimension increases the ability to differentiate tourist destinations in an increasingly competitive market.

However, despite its potential, gastronomic film tourism is still an emerging field in academic literature, with significant gaps related to the structuring of models for planning, managing, and operating this type of tourism product. In this context, future research can contribute to the advancement of the topic through the analysis of case studies, the investigation of implementation strategies in different territorial contexts, and the evaluation of the economic, cultural, and tourism impacts resulting from this type of initiative.

Thus, further research on gastronomic film tourism may not only broaden the theoretical understanding of the integration between audiovisual, gastronomy, and tourism, but also offer practical support to public managers, entrepreneurs, and tourism planners interested in developing innovative and sustainable experiences in the sector.

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EMPLOYEES' AWARENESS OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND FOOD WASTE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN THE HOSPITALITY SECTOR OF THE AUTONOMOUS PROVINCE OF VOJVODINA

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ABSTRACT: *The research was conducted on the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina with the aim of examining the connection between the level of education of employees and their familiarity with the concept of circular economy. In addition, the results indicate that part of the catering establishments in the region do not sufficiently apply waste sorting practices, especially "A la carte" and boarding restaurants, and the results of the descriptive analysis indicate that the respondents in the age group 36-45 years less often state that they regularly apply waste selection practices, which indicates the need for additional education. Comparison with the results of studies from Italy and India shows that low awareness, lack of knowledge, and limited education are the main obstacles to the application of circular economy principles. The findings point to the need for increasing employee education and providing infrastructure and organizational support in order to improve sustainable waste management in the hospitality sector.*

KEYWORDS: *circular economy, food waste management, employee awareness, sustainable development*

INTRODUCTION

The paradigm of sustainable development implies the integration of three key dimensions — economic, ecological, and social — in all spheres of society, emphasizing the need for a responsible and balanced approach to business (Radjenovic & Krstic, 2020). This concept implies the commitment of organizations and companies to align their activities with the interests of all interested parties, contributing to the long-term preservation of the environment and improvement of the community's quality of life. Cainelli et al. (2020) emphasize that innovations aimed at reducing waste, recycling, and rational use of materials must be at the very center of the circular economy policy, while Brown et al. (2019) point out that the primary goals of these innovations are to reduce the dependence of economic growth on non-renewable resources and prevent environmental degradation. According to data from the European Environmental Protection Agency (2018), food waste generated in households and the hotel sector makes up as much as 61% of total municipal waste, which indicates the need for a multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of this problem. In Serbia, as part of a project implemented in cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the private sector, UNDP (2021) encourages the transition from a linear to a circular economy model, with a special emphasis on managing food surpluses and sustainable use of resources. Data from the Environmental Protection Agency (2018) show that a significant percentage of food waste is still disposed of in landfills, which contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, while

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NALED (Guzina, 2020) estimates that more efficient waste management and its reuse could create up to 30,000 new jobs.

Reisch et al. (2013), as well as Filimonau and De Coteau (2019), point to the environmental and social challenges caused by food waste and emphasize the necessity of a systemic approach to waste management in the hospitality industry, while Reisch (2021) underlines the importance of a transdisciplinary approach as a prerequisite for effectively combating these challenges. In this context, Fatimah et al. (2020), as well as Rabiu and Jaeger-Erben (2022), emphasize that the circular economy in hospitality practices plays a key role in solving contemporary social and environmental challenges, and according to Geissdoerfer et al. (2017), circular practices have a regenerative character aimed at preventing and reducing waste, preserving natural resources and protecting the environment. Research by Greer et al. (2020) shows that the application of circular models at the level of enterprises and end users contributes to the optimization of costs and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, which is also confirmed by Coderoni and Perito (2020), Klug and Niemand (2021), Teigiserova et al. (2020), and Uen and Rodriguez (2023). For this paper, the hierarchy of food waste management according to Cardenas et al. (2024) and Teigiserova et al. (2020) was adopted, which includes at least six discrete sets of practices:

Table 1: Overview of Waste Reduction Studies

Serial Number	Category	Description	References
1.	Prevention	Waste Reduction at the Source	Lefadola et al., 2018; Wu & Teng, 2022
2.	Minimization	Process Management to Minimize Waste Generation	Cicatiello & Franco, 2020; McGrath,2021; Papargyropoulou et al., 2019
3.	Reuse	All food is utilized, including edible leftovers, opened packages, and stored food.	Reynolds et al., 2020
4.	Recycling	Ensures that all edible food is (re)directed before it becomes waste.	Giordano et al., 2020; Joardder, 2019; Paltrinieri et al., 2022
5.	Recovery	Prevention of edible food disposal through recovery activities	Lombardi & Costantino, 2021; Wellton & Ostrom, 2022
6.	Disposal	Ensuring that edible food is not discarded and that waste is redirected to another sector within the system	Soma, 2020

Source: Author's research

Based on the analysis of relevant literature and existing research, a lack of empirical data was noticed on the connection between the level of education and the type of catering establishments, with the degree of application of circular practices of gastronomic waste management in Vojvodina, which served as the basis and main focus of this paper.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted using a questionnaire created on the Google Forms platform. It is a cross-sectional study conducted in the period from March to July 2025, during which 215 valid responses were collected. The sample included catering establishments on the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, among which were classic a la carte restaurants, hotels in which a la carte restaurants operate, specialized a la carte restaurants, hotels with a boarding method of business, fast food restaurants, as well as mass catering restaurants (school and student canteens). The respondents were employed in operational positions in the kitchen (chefs), who are directly involved in the process of food preparation and thus potentially influence the creation and management of gastronomic waste.

The goal of the research was to examine the connection between the level of education of the respondents and their familiarity with the concept of circular economy, as well as to analyze the differences between types of catering establishments in terms of gastronomic waste management practices on the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. The survey questionnaire used in this research was previously validated to ensure its reliability and relevance for data collection. For this purpose, pilot testing was conducted on a sample of 25 employees in the hospitality sector. The goal of this pilot test was to check the comprehensibility and clarity of the questions, identify and eliminate possible technical errors in the formulation or structure of the questionnaire, and eliminate possible ambiguities that could affect the accuracy of the answers. The results of the pilot testing enabled the refinement and finalization of the questionnaire, which ensured its applicability to a wider sample of respondents, with maximum precision and consistency of the collected data.

Data processing and analysis were performed with the help of IBM SPSS Statistics software, version 23 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The chi-square test of independence (χ^2) was applied to examine the relationship between categorical variables, provided that the prerequisites for its application were met. Based on the obtained results, the existence of statistically significant differences between the empirical and expected frequencies and the possibility of rejecting the null hypothesis were assessed. In cases where the sample size or certain frequencies did not meet the assumptions required for the application of the Pearson chi-square test, Fisher's exact test was used. For more complex distributions and to verify the reliability of the results, a Monte Carlo simulation was applied. The strength of association between two-dimensional and multidimensional variables was determined using the Phi and Cramer's V coefficients, which allow a quantitative assessment of the intensity of relationships between the analyzed categories. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant relationship between the respondents' level of education and their awareness of the concept of the circular economy?
2. Are there differences in waste management practices (waste sorting) depending on the age structure of the respondents?
3. Are there differences in waste management practices depending on the type of hospitality establishment?
4. How do employees perceive and apply the principles of gastronomic waste management in their daily work?

RESULTS

Analysis of the Relationship Between Education Level and Respondents' Awareness of the Circular Economy Concept

A total of 215 respondents participated in the study, and the distribution of respondents according to gender, age, and length of work experience is presented in Table 2. It can be observed that 55.3% of the respondents were male, while 44.7% were female, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution within the sample.

The analysis of the age structure shows that the largest proportion of respondents (40%) belongs to the 36–45 age group, while respondents older than 55 years are the least represented (2.3%). The remaining age groups are distributed as follows: 20–25 years (19.1%), 26–35 years (25.6%), and 46–55 years (13%). Such a distribution indicates that the study primarily includes respondents from the middle-aged group of employees in the hospitality sector.

When considering the length of work experience, it can be noted that the largest share of respondents (65.11%) has up to 10 years of work experience, while the smallest proportion (2.34%) consists of respondents with more than 15 years of work experience. The remaining categories include respondents with up to 1 year of work experience (13.95%) and those with 3–5 years of work experience (18.60%). These findings indicate that the majority of respondents possess considerable professional experience in the sector, which may contribute to the reliability of their perspectives on food waste management practices.

Table 2. Distribution of Respondents by Gender, Age, and Length of Work Experience

Variables		Number of Respondents (N)	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Gender	Male	119	55,3
	Female	96	44,7
Age	20-25	41	19,1
	26-35	55	25,6
	36-45	86	40
	46-55	28	13
	Over 55	5	2,3
Length of Work Experience	Up to 1 year	30	13,95
	3–5 years	40	18,60
	10 years	140	65,11
	Over 15 years	5	2,33

Source: Authors' own research

The first question of relevance for further investigation concerned whether the respondents were familiar with the term circular economy. The analysis of the collected data, presented in Table 3, indicates noticeable differences in respondents' familiarity with the concept and significance of the circular economy in relation to their level of education. Out of a total of 215 respondents, 83 (38.6%) reported being familiar with the concept, while 132 (61.4%) were not.

The highest percentage of respondents familiar with the term circular economy was those with a university degree (38.6%), suggesting a potential association between a higher level of education and better awareness of sustainable development concepts. Conversely, the largest proportion of respondents who were not familiar with the term came from the group with secondary education (70.5%), which is consistent with the workforce structure in the hospitality sector, where employees with secondary education are predominant.

Interestingly, respondents with the highest level of education (master's or doctoral studies) demonstrated a greater percentage of familiarity with the circular economy concept (10.8% and 2.4%, respectively), despite representing a relatively small portion of the overall sample.

Table 3: Respondents' Familiarity with the Concept and Significance of the Circular Economy by Level of Education

Respondents' Familiarity with the Concept and Significance of the Circular Economy		**Level of Education**					**Total**
		Primary School	Secondary School	College / Higher Education	Master's Degree	Doctoral Degree	
Familiar	N	0	40	32	9	2	83
	%	0,0%	48,2%	38,6%	10,8%	2,4%	100,0%
Not Familiar	N	2	93	27	9	1	132
	%	1,5%	70,5%	20,5%	6,8%	0,8%	100,0%
Total	N	2	133	59	18	3	215
	%	0,9%	61,9%	27,4%	8,4%	1,4%	100,0%

Source: Authors' own research

In the further analysis of the results, the Chi-Square (χ^2) test was initially considered; however, the obtained results indicated that the assumptions for its application were not met (more than 20% of the expected frequencies were less than 5, with a minimum expected value of 0.77). Therefore, Fisher's exact test was conducted as a more reliable alternative for small samples. The obtained test value (13.041) with a significance level of $p < 0.05$ indicates the existence of a statistically significant difference between the examined groups. This result implies that the probability of the observed difference occurring by chance, under the null hypothesis, is less than 5%, leading to its rejection.

Consequently, it can be concluded that there is a statistically confirmed difference in the level of familiarity with the concept of the circular economy depending on the respondents' level of education (Primary School, Secondary School, University Degree, Master's Degree, and Doctoral Degree).

Table 4: Analysis of Respondents' Familiarity with the Term "Circular Economy" by Level of Education

Respondents' Familiarity with the Term "Circular Economy"		Level of Education		**Total**
		University Degree	Primary/Secondary School	
Familiar	N	43	40	83
	%	51,8%	48,2%	100,0%
Not Familiar	N	37	95	132
	%	28,0%	72,0%	100,0%
Total	N	80	135	215
	%	37,2%	62,8%	100,0%

Source: Authors' own research

Table 4.1: *Chi-Square (χ^2)* test

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12,330[a]	1	,000		
Continuity Correction	11,334	1	,001		
Likelihood Ratio	12,257	1	,000		
Fisher's Exact Test				,001	,000
N of Valid Cases	215				

Source: Authors' own research

The analysis of the Chi-Square test results presented in Table 4.1 indicates a statistically significant difference in respondents' familiarity with the term "circular economy" depending on their level of education, when education was categorized into two groups: higher education and primary/secondary education. The Pearson Chi-Square test revealed a significant difference between the groups ($\chi^2 = 12.330$; $df = 1$; $p < 0.05$), allowing for the rejection of the null hypothesis and suggesting that education has a significant impact on knowledge of the circular economy concept.

To further assess the strength of the association between these categorical variables, the Phi and Cramer's V coefficients were calculated. These indicate the presence of a weak but statistically significant effect, or a moderate positive correlation: respondents with higher education demonstrate a greater level of familiarity with the concept of the circular economy compared to the group with lower education.

These results highlight the importance of education in shaping awareness of circular economy principles and in promoting responsible and sustainable practices in the hospitality sector. For the assessment of the association strength, Phi and Cramer's V coefficients were used.

Table 4.1.1:*Symmetric Measures*

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	,239	,000
	Cramer's V	,239	,000
N of Valid Cases		215	

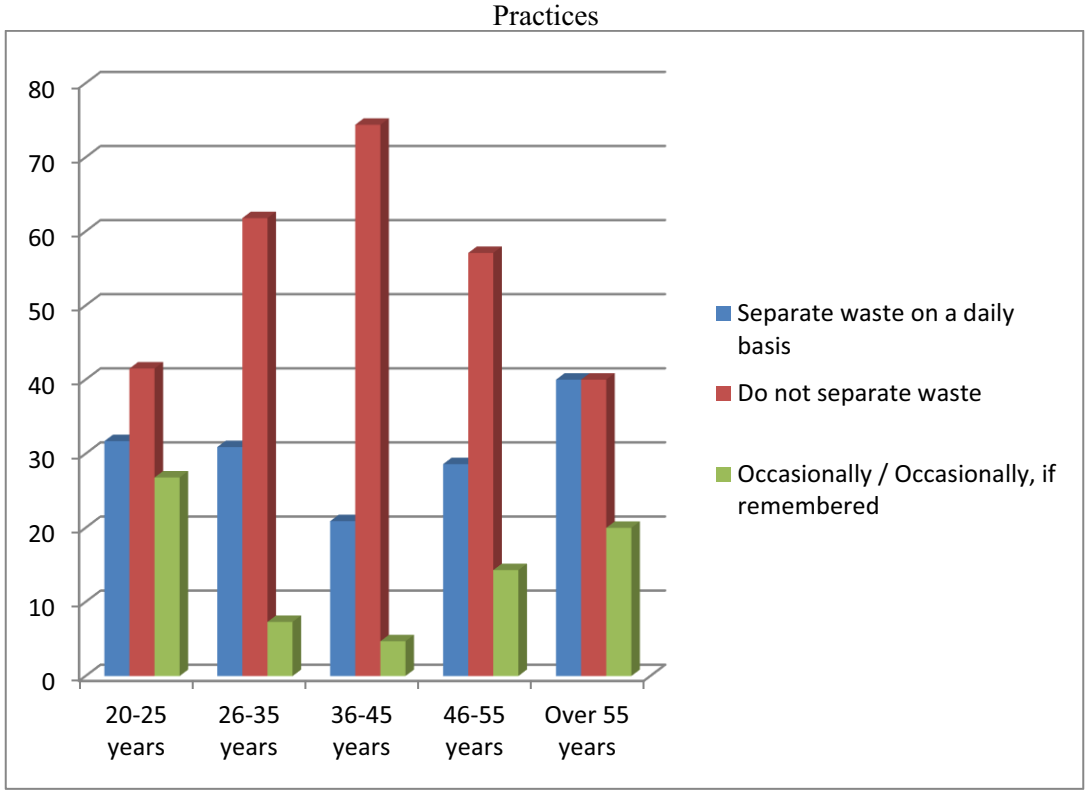
The results of the symmetric measures, presented in Table 4.1.1, show that both the Phi and Cramer's V coefficients are 0.239, indicating a weak but statistically significant effect between the categorical variables – level of education and familiarity with the term "circular economy". A Phi coefficient value of 0.239 represents a weak to moderate association between the observed variables, suggesting that respondents with higher education are more likely to recognize and understand the concept of the circular economy. However, the influence of education on the level of familiarity is not particularly strong.

These findings imply that educational attainment plays an important role in shaping awareness and understanding of circular economy principles. They also highlight the need for additional training and professional development for employees in the hospitality sector to promote sustainable practices and environmental responsibility.

Analysis of the Impact of Respondents' Age Structure on Waste Management Practices

The next question of relevance for further analysis posed to the respondents concerned waste sorting practices in hospitality establishments and was formulated as follows: *"Do you separate waste in your hospitality establishment?"* This question aimed to determine the extent to which the basic principles of waste management are applied in practice, specifically whether employees in the hospitality sector carry out waste segregation at the point of generation. The obtained responses provide insight into the level of implementation of sustainable practices and serve as an important indicator of employees' awareness regarding the significance of proper waste management within the framework of the circular economy.

Figure 1: Analysis of the Impact of Respondents' Age Structure on Waste Management Practices



Source: Authors' own research

Figure 1 presents the frequency of food waste management practices in relation to the respondents' age structure. The data analysis reveals that the largest proportion of respondents who do not implement sustainable food waste management practices belongs to the 36–45 age group. Conversely, employees over 55 years of age demonstrate the highest level of regular waste management, indicating more frequent adoption of waste sorting practices and greater awareness of sustainability within the context of the circular economy and the hospitality sector.

These findings suggest that differences in waste management practices exist across age groups, with older employees exhibiting greater discipline and adherence to sustainability principles.

Analysis of Results Regarding Waste Sorting Policies in Relation to Types of Hospitality Establishments

Further analysis of the data obtained through the survey aimed to identify differences in waste management practices depending on the type of hospitality establishment, with the results presented in Table 5. The highest proportion of respondents who manage food waste on a daily basis was observed in hotels operating à la carte restaurants (50%) and hotels with a buffet-style service (40%). Conversely, the lowest level of regular waste management was recorded in fast-food restaurants (16.3%) and mass catering establishments, such as school and university canteens (15.8%).

The majority of respondents across all types of hospitality establishments reported that they "do not have the conditions" for regular food waste management, totaling 61.9%. The practice of managing waste "occasionally, when remembered" was reported by 11.2% of respondents, being most frequent in specialized à la carte restaurants (28.6%).

These results indicate that differences in physical and organizational infrastructure, as well as the type of operation, may be associated with the implementation of sustainable food waste management practices. Hotels and hospitality establishments with greater resource support demonstrate better adoption of sustainable practices compared to mass catering and fast-food establishments.

Table 5: Analysis of Hospitality Establishment Types and Frequency of Waste Sorting

Type of hospitality establishment where the respondent is employed		Do you sort waste in your hospitality establishment?			**Total**
		Yes, daily	No, we do not have the conditions for that	Sometimes, when we remember	
Classic "A la carte" restaurant	N	21	47	10	78
	%	26,9%	60,3%	12,8%	100,0%
Specialized "A la carte" restaurant – national restaurant, charda	N	5	10	6	21
	%	23,8%	47,6%	28,6%	100,0%
Mass catering restaurant (student/school canteen)	N	3	16	0	19
	%	15,8%	84,2%	0,0%	100,0%
Hotel – buffet-style operation	N	12	16	2	30
	%	40,0%	53,3%	6,7%	100,0%
Hotel with an operating "A la carte" restaurant	N	9	7	2	18
	%	50,0%	38,9%	11,1%	100,0%
Fast food restaurant	N	8	37	4	49
	%	16,3%	75,5%	8,2%	100,0%
Total	N	58	133	24	215
	%	27,0%	61,9%	11,2%	100,0%

Table 5.1: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	23,015[a]	10	,011
Likelihood Ratio	23,120	10	,010
N of Valid Cases	215		

Table 5.1.1 Chi-Square χ 2 test– Frequency of waste management in respondents' hospitality establishments

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Monte Carlo Sig. (2-sided)		
				Significance	99% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Pearson Chi-Square	23,015[a]	10	,011	,010[b]	,008	,013
Likelihood Ratio	23,120	10	,010	,016[b]	,013	,019
Fisher's Exact Test	20,652			,016[b]	,013	,019
N of Valid Cases	215					

The analysis of the results presented in Tables 5.1 and 5.1.1 indicates the existence of a statistically significant difference in the frequency of food waste management depending on the type of hospitality establishment. According to the Pearson chi-square test, the obtained value of χ^2 is 23.015 (df = 10, p = 0.011), confirming a significant difference between groups.

Since 27.8% of the cells had an expected count less than 5, Fisher's exact test was not applicable. To confirm the results, a Monte Carlo simulation was conducted with 10,000 sampled tables and an initial number of 2,000,000 iterations. The simulation results confirmed the statistically significant difference ($p \leq 0.05$) with a 99% confidence interval (Lower Bound = 0.008; Upper Bound = 0.013).

These results confirm that there is an association between the type of hospitality establishment and the implementation of waste management practices. Establishments with better infrastructure and organizational support, such as hotels and buffet-style restaurants, demonstrate a higher frequency of daily waste management, while mass catering and fast-food restaurants exhibit a lower level of adoption of sustainable practices. The findings highlight the importance of resources, organization, and structural characteristics of establishments as factors influencing the implementation of circular practices in the hospitality sector.

Analysis of the data presented in Table 6 shows the distribution of food waste management frequency among employees in classic "À la carte" restaurants and specialized types of "À la carte" restaurants (such as national restaurants and chardas). Out of a total of 99 respondents, only 26 (26.3%) sort waste regularly, while the majority, 57 respondents (57.6%), report that they "do not have adequate conditions" to implement this practice. The practice of "sometimes, when we remember" was reported by 16 respondents (16.2%), with this percentage being slightly higher in specialized restaurants (28.6%) compared to classic "À la carte" restaurants (12.8%).

These results indicate a significant difference in the implementation of food waste management practices between the two types of hospitality establishments. Classic "À la carte" restaurants show a higher prevalence of inadequate conditions for waste management, whereas specialized restaurants, although fewer in number, more frequently apply the "sometimes" practice. This may indicate greater awareness of circular economy principles and sustainability within this segment of the hospitality industry.

Table 6: Analysis of the Frequency of Waste Sorting between Classic "A la carte" Restaurants and Specialized "A la carte" Restaurants (National Restaurants, Chardas)

Type of hospitality establishment where the respondent is employed		Do you sort waste in your hospitality establishment?			Total
		Yes, daily	No, we do not have the conditions for that	Sometimes, when we remember	
Classic "A la carte" restaurant	N	21	47	10	78
	%	26,9%	60,3%	12,8%	100,0%
Specialized "A la carte" restaurant – national restaurant, charda	N	5	10	6	21
	%	23,8%	47,6%	28,6%	100,0%
Total	N	26	57	16	99
	%	26,3%	57,6%	16,2%	100,0%

Source: Authors' own research

Table 6.1: *Chi-Square Tests*

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3,060[a]	2	,217	,235
Likelihood Ratio	2,748	2	,253	,268
Fisher's Exact Test	2,947			,220
N of Valid Cases	99			

Source: Authors' own research

The analysis of the results presented in Table 6.1 shows that, although there are differences in the frequency of food waste management between employees in "À la carte" restaurants and fast-food restaurants, these differences are not statistically significant. According to the Pearson χ^2 test ($\chi^2 = 4.620$; df = 2; $p = 0.099 > 0.05$), the relationship between restaurant type and food waste management practices does not demonstrate a statistically significant association. A similar result is provided by the Likelihood Ratio test ($p = 0.091$).

These findings suggest that, regardless of whether the establishment is a classic "A la carte" restaurant or a fast-food restaurant, food waste management practices are applied at a similar level. Differences in absolute numbers and percentages do not represent statistically significant variations, indicating that the main limiting factors for implementing these practices are primarily organizational and infrastructural, rather than the type of restaurant itself.

The analysis of data presented in Table 7 shows the frequency of food waste management practices in "A la carte" restaurants and buffet-style restaurants. The results indicate that 40% of employees in buffet-style restaurants manage food waste daily, compared to 26.3% in "A la carte" restaurants.

Conversely, 57.6% of respondents from "A la carte" restaurants reported that they do not have adequate conditions to implement this practice, compared to 53.3% in buffet-style restaurants. The response "sometimes, when we remember" was reported by 16.2% of respondents in "A la carte" restaurants and 6.7% in buffet-style restaurants.

These results suggest that buffet-style restaurants tend to implement daily food waste management practices more frequently than classic "A la carte" restaurants, which may be attributed to organizational differences in operations and internal logistics standards for waste management.

Table 7: Analysis of the Frequency of Waste Sorting between "A la carte" Restaurants and Buffet-Style Restaurants

"A la carte" Restaurants and Buffet-Style Restaurants		Do you sort waste in your hospitality establishment?			Total
		Yes, daily	No, we do not have the conditions for that	Sometimes, when we remember	
„A la carte" restaurant	N	26	57	16	99
	%	26,3%	57,6%	16,2%	100,0%
Buffet-Style Restaurants	N	12	16	2	30
	%	40,0%	53,3%	6,7%	100,0%
Total	N	38	73	18	129
	%	29,5%	56,6%	14,0%	100,0%

Source: Authors' own research

Table 7.1: ***Chi-Square Tests***

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3,036[a]	2	,219
Likelihood Ratio	3,194	2	,203
N of Valid Cases	129		

Source: Authors' own research

The analysis of the results presented in Table 7.1 indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in the frequency of food waste management between "A la carte" restaurants and buffet-style restaurants ($\chi^2 = 3.036$; df = 2; $p = 0.219 > 0.05$).

Although buffet-style restaurants show a slightly higher frequency of daily waste management (40% compared to 26.3% in "A la carte" restaurants), this difference is not statistically significant. This suggests that, in this context, the type of restaurant is not a decisive factor for the implementation of food waste management practices; rather, other organizational and infrastructural aspects of operations may exert a greater influence.

Analysis of Hospitality Employees' Attitudes Regarding Food Waste Management

The final part of the study aimed to examine the attitudes of hospitality employees regarding food waste management. This approach enabled a quantitative assessment of respondents' attitudes and an analysis of their stance toward the principles of food waste management within the hospitality sector.

Table 7: Hospitality Employees' Attitudes towards Food Waste Management in Hospitality Establishments (N = 215)

Statement	1 N %	2 N %	3 N %	4 N %	5 N %	Mean Score
Local regulations regarding the disposal of surplus/food waste are clear to me.	80 37,21	28 13,02	46 21,39	23 10,69	38 17,67	2,59
I find it easy to follow local rules and regulations regarding food waste disposal.	61 28,37	47 21,86	42 19,53	28 13,02	37 17,20	2,69
The Republic of Serbia has an established legislative framework for food waste management in the hospitality sector.	77 35,81	47 21,86	49 22,79	21 9,76	21 9,76	2,36
I am aware of the harmful effects of food waste, but I only follow what I am instructed to do at work.	34 15,81	38 17,67	36 16,74	44 20,46	33 15,34	2,60
I believe that food waste recycling can significantly contribute to the development of a circular economy in Serbia.	29 13,48	22 10,23	50 23,25	42 19,53	72 33,48	3,49

Based on the data presented in Table 7, which reflects hospitality employees' attitudes towards food waste management in hospitality establishments, an analysis was conducted using a five-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree), where respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the presented statements.

The mean scores indicate that respondents most strongly recognize the importance of food waste recycling for the development of a circular economy in Serbia (M = 3.49), reflecting awareness of the potential of recycling as a tool for sustainable business practices. The statement *"I am aware of the harmful effects of food waste, but I only follow what I am instructed to do at work"* (M = 2.60) demonstrates a moderate level of awareness regarding ecological consequences, coupled with limited personal initiative in applying environmentally friendly practices, which may result from a lack of systematic education and incentives for active participation in waste management.

In contrast, statements related to the legal and institutional aspects of waste management received lower mean scores: *"Local regulations regarding the disposal of surplus/food waste are clear to me"* (M = 2.59), *"I find it easy to follow local rules and regulations regarding food waste disposal"* (M = 2.69), and *"The Republic of Serbia has an established legislative framework for food waste management in the hospitality sector"* (M = 2.36). These results indicate insufficient clarity and practical implementation of legal regulations, representing a potential barrier to the consistent application of circular economy principles in the hospitality sector.

Overall, the mean scores range from 2.36 to 3.49, reflecting a moderate level of awareness and willingness among hospitality employees to implement food waste management measures. Key factors for improvement include systematic education, more precise legislative regulation, and practical training for employees, aimed at increasing awareness and facilitating the application of circular practices in the daily operations of hospitality establishments.

DISCUSSION

During the study conducted in the hospitality sector in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, a significant influence of the education level on employees' awareness of the circular economy was observed. The results indicate that the level of education directly affects familiarity with the term "circular economy" and its significance, which is also reflected in the perception of the importance of food waste management in hospitality establishments. This is consistent with the findings of Pelau and Chinie (2018), who noted that individuals with lower levels of education have a reduced understanding of circular economy principles and exhibit a lower sense of responsibility in their implementation. Education thus plays a key role in understanding and applying this concept, as well as in motivating individuals to manage resources sustainably. Raising awareness of the circular economy can help hospitality employees reduce costs, improve resource efficiency, and enhance attractiveness to consumers who increasingly value environmental responsibility.

The study by Dagiliūtė and Musteikytė (2019) indicates that younger hospitality employees often lack the habit of sorting food waste. In contrast, the results of this research suggest that respondents in the middle age group (36–45 years) also do not have sufficiently developed awareness regarding food waste disposal, highlighting the need for additional employee education on sustainability principles and the circular economy.

Analysis by type of hospitality establishment revealed that employees in Vojvodina apply food waste sorting practices to a limited extent. This differs from the findings of Tatàno et al. (2017), who identified systematic sorting of biodegradable waste as the dominant fraction in hospitality establishments in the Marche region of Italy. These differences can be explained

by organizational and infrastructural constraints observed in hospitality establishments in Vojvodina, such as underdeveloped systems for separate collection of biodegradable waste, limited employee education, and a generally low level of awareness regarding sustainable waste management among hospitality staff. These findings indicate the need for further research to identify structural, organizational, and institutional factors that influence the implementation of waste sorting practices. Similarly, Bharucha's (2018) study in Mumbai highlights that a low level of awareness and knowledge among employees and managers is a significant reason for the low frequency of food waste sorting. A lack of information on the economic and environmental benefits of these practices reduces motivation for their application, emphasizing the need for education and training within the hospitality sector.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the sample included exclusively employees from hospitality establishments in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader regional or national context. Second, the data were collected through a survey questionnaire, which relies on respondents' self-assessment and may lead to socially desirable responses, with participants potentially portraying their behavior more positively than it actually is. Additional limitations include the relatively small sample size and the exclusive focus on operational kitchen staff, without including management or other sectors.

Future research could involve a larger number of hospitality establishments, cover different regions, and employ a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, such as interviews and field observations, to obtain a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of food waste management practices. Additionally, integrating data from both managerial and operational levels could provide better insights into the factors influencing the implementation of circular economy principles in the hospitality sector.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the obtained data, it can be concluded that the implementation of food waste sorting practices in the territory of Vojvodina is carried out to a very limited extent, and not solely due to technical reasons, such as the lack of adequate space for waste storage, but also due to cultural and educational factors. Employees in restaurants are often insufficiently informed about the importance of the circular economy and sustainable resource management, which may lead to a lack of initiative in adopting waste sorting practices, even though these practices offer both economic and environmental benefits.

Significant improvements could be achieved if training programs, encompassing both the theoretical aspects of the circular economy and the practical aspects of waste management, were widely accessible. It is also advisable to encourage governments and local authorities to support hospitality businesses through subsidies or other forms of assistance for investments in infrastructure that facilitates waste sorting and recycling.

The introduction of standards and regulations requiring hospitality establishments to implement sustainable practices, along with certification programs for environmentally responsible restaurants, could strengthen the adoption of these practices. This would result in a greater number of establishments actively engaged in waste management and the application of circular economy principles.

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FROM REGULATION TO MARKET TRANSFORMATION: NON-HOTEL ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES AFTER THE 2025 LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

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ABSTRACT: *In recent years, the non-hotel accommodation market in Italy has experienced significant growth, driven by the spread of digital booking platforms and changing traveller preferences. However, the rapid expansion of the sector has raised issues relating to tax transparency, safety and competition with the hotel sector. Between 2024 and 2025, the Italian legislator introduced important regulatory changes, including the requirement for a National Identification Code (CIN), the strengthening of administrative traceability systems and new provisions relating to guest identification, which have effectively limited the use of self-check-in [5]. This paper analyses the evolution of the Italian non-hotel accommodation market between 2024 and 2025 using statistical data from institutional sources. The aim is to assess whether the new regulations have led to growth or contraction in the sector's economy. The results show that, although tourism in Italy continues to grow, the new regulatory measures have reduced irregular supply and changed the structure of the non-hotel market, leading to a short-term contraction of some informal activities but promoting greater transparency and professionalisation of the sector in the medium term.*

KEYWORDS: *Short-term tourist rentals; non-hotel accommodation; tourism regulation; tourism Italy 2025; overtourism.*

1.INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the non-hotel accommodation market has experienced unprecedented growth, driven by the expansion of digital booking platforms, changes in traveller preferences and an increase in international tourist flows. In Italy, non-hotel accommodation – including short-term rental apartments, bed & breakfasts and other non-hotel solutions – has gradually gained importance, contributing significantly to the national tourism economy. However, the rapid expansion of the sector has raised a number of regulatory, fiscal and safety issues, generating debate about market transparency and conditions of competition with the traditional hotel sector.

In response to these developments, in 2025 the Italian legislature introduced a series of significant regulatory changes, including the requirement for accommodation facilities to have a National Identification Code (CIN), the strengthening of administrative traceability systems, and new provisions relating to guest identification, which have effectively limited the use of self-check-in. These measures represent an emblematic case of regulation in a rapidly changing market, raising the crucial question: have the legislative changes of 2025 increased or reduced the economy of the non-hotel market?

This study aims to answer this question through an empirical analysis based on official statistical data from ISTAT, the Ministry of Tourism, the Bank of Italy and Unioncamere, supplemented by a review of the scientific literature on the phenomenon of short-term tourist rentals. The main objective is to assess the impact of the 2025 regulations both on the supply side, in terms of the number of registered establishments and the professionalisation of operators, and on the demand side, in terms of tourist numbers and visitor spending. The contribution of this work is twofold. Firstly, it offers an up-to-date, empirically based analysis of the Italian non-hotel market in the period 2024–2025, highlighting the dynamics linked to the introduction of the CIN and the ban on self-check-in. Secondly, it provides a discussion of the policy implications of the legislative reforms, with a particular focus on the

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effects on the informal market, competition between operators and the long-term sustainability of the sector.

2. EVOLUTION OF TOURISM IN ITALY BETWEEN 2024 AND 2025

The context in which the 2025 reforms are taking place is characterised by a phase of strong growth in tourism in Italy. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics, in 2024 the tourism sector recorded 458.4 million overnight stays in accommodation facilities, an increase of 2.5% compared to 2023 [1]. This result placed Italy in second place in the European Union in terms of tourist arrivals, behind only Spain and ahead of France [1].

The growth in tourism was driven mainly by international demand. In 2024, foreign tourist arrivals increased by 15.6%, while those of tourists residing in Italy grew by 5.9% [1]. An analysis of the distribution of arrivals among the different types of accommodation facilities shows that the hotel sector continues to account for the largest share of the market. In 2024, approximately 61.9% of tourist arrivals were recorded in hotels, while 38.1% were recorded in non-hotel accommodation [1].

Despite the prevalence of the hotel sector, the non-hotel sector has shown significant growth in recent years, especially in major urban tourist destinations and areas of high cultural appeal.

In 2025, tourism growth in Italy continued. The most recent data indicate that in the fourth quarter of 2025, tourist arrivals increased by 2.9% compared to the same period of the previous year, with particularly significant growth in the non-hotel sector, where the increase in arrivals reached 6.6% [2].

These figures suggest that, despite the introduction of new regulations, tourist demand for non-hotel accommodation continues to remain high.

3. ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF THE NON-HOTEL MARKET

The non-hotel sector is now a structural component of the Italian tourism economy. According to data from the Ministry of Tourism, in 2025 there were over 571,000 hotel and non-hotel accommodation facilities registered in the national database of accommodation facilities [3].

A significant part of this offer is represented by apartments and private homes intended for short-term tourist rentals. Market analyses indicate that millions of overnight stays are booked each year through digital home-sharing platforms.

For example, analysis of the short-term rental market shows that in the winter months of 2024–2025 alone, approximately 4.4 million nights in private homes had already been booked through tourist intermediation platforms [4].

In some cities of art and tourist destinations with high visitor numbers, short-term rentals are now a fundamental component of the local accommodation offer. From an economic point of view, tourism is one of the most important sectors of the Italian economy. In 2024, foreign tourist spending in the country reached 54.2 billion euro, an increase of 4.9% over the previous year [6].

This context of strong economic expansion has made it necessary to introduce regulatory instruments capable of monitoring and regulating an increasingly complex market.

4. INTRODUCTION OF THE NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION CODE (CIN)

One of the main legislative changes introduced in 2025 is the requirement for all accommodation facilities and properties intended for tourist rentals to have a National Identification Code (CIN) [5].

The CIN is a unique code assigned to each establishment and registered in the National Database of Accommodation Facilities. The code must be indicated in online advertisements and visible outside the establishment, allowing the authorities to easily identify regular businesses [5].

The introduction of this tool has had a significant impact on the market. In the first few months of 2025, approximately 451,000 establishments out of more than 571,000 were already registered with the CIN, accounting for approximately 79% of all accommodation facilities in the national database [3].

The new system also introduced administrative penalties ranging from €800 to €8,000 for owners who do not request the code or do not display it correctly in online advertisements [5].

One of the main effects of the introduction of the CIN has been a reduction in irregular supply in the short-term rental market.

5. THE BAN ON SELF-CHECK-IN AND THE NEW SECURITY REGULATIONS

Another measure that has affected the functioning of the non-hotel market concerns the methods of identifying guests.

The Italian authorities have reiterated the obligation for accommodation managers to personally identify guests upon arrival, as required by public safety regulations [5]. This approach has effectively led to restrictions on the use of self-check-in systems based on key boxes or automated access.

Before these restrictions were introduced, many operators in the non-hotel sector had adopted automatic check-in systems to reduce management costs and allow access to accommodation even in the absence of the owner.

The obligation to identify guests in person has therefore introduced new organisational costs for accommodation providers, who must ensure that someone is present to check guests' documents and transmit the data to the public security authorities.

6. IMPACT OF REFORMS ON THE ECONOMY OF THE SECTOR

To understand the impact of the new regulations on the economy of the non-hotel market, it is necessary to distinguish between short-term and long-term effects. In the short term, the introduction of the CIN and the strengthening of controls have led to a reduction in irregular supply. Some operators who managed tourist rentals informally have chosen to exit the market or convert their properties to other forms of rental. However, data on tourist flows show that demand for non-hotel accommodation continues to grow. In 2025, overnight stays in non-hotel accommodation increased by 6.6%, a higher growth rate than that recorded in the hotel sector [2].

This suggests that the new regulations have not reduced tourist demand, but rather changed the structure of supply.

7. DISCUSSION: GROWTH OR DECLINE IN THE NON-HOTEL ECONOMY?

In light of the data analysed, the answer to the research question cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between market growth and decline. The impact of the legislative reforms introduced in 2025 appears to be more complex and articulated, as these measures have had different effects on the supply and demand sides of tourism.

From the supply side, the introduction of the National Identification Code (CIN) and the strengthening of administrative controls have helped to reduce the presence of informal

operators in the tourist rental market. The obligation to register accommodation facilities and the provision of administrative penalties for non-compliant operators have encouraged many owners to regularise their activities or, in some cases, to exit the short-term rental market. This process has led to a decrease in the overall number of listings available on digital platforms in some tourist cities, suggesting that part of the previous supply was characterised by forms of management that did not fully comply with current legislation.

At the same time, however, analysis of tourist flow data shows that demand for non-hotel accommodation has not declined significantly. On the contrary, occupancy rates in non-hotel accommodation continued to grow even in the period following the introduction of the new regulations. In 2025, for example, overnight stays in non-hotel establishments increased by 6.6% compared to the previous year, a higher growth rate than that recorded in the hotel sector [2]. This suggests that tourists' preferences for forms of accommodation other than traditional hotels remain strong and continue to represent an important component of contemporary tourist demand.

A further element to consider is the qualitative transformation of the non-hotel sector. The introduction of more stringent administrative requirements, such as the CIN and guest identification procedures, may in fact encourage a process of progressive professionalisation among operators in the market. In this context, establishments that are managed in a more organised and compliant manner tend to strengthen their competitive position, while businesses characterised by occasional or informal management encounter greater difficulties in sustaining the administrative and operational costs imposed by regulation.

From an economic point of view, this process may lead to a reduction in the overall number of operators in the short term, but at the same time promote greater market stability in the medium and long term. A more regulated and transparent sector allows for better collection of statistical data, greater fiscal control and more effective planning of tourism policies by public institutions.

Furthermore, the reduction in irregular supply can help to rebalance competition between traditional hotels and operators in the non-hotel sector. In the years prior to the reforms, the rapid expansion of short-term tourist rentals had generated significant debate regarding the conditions of competition between the different segments of the accommodation market. Hotels, subject to more stringent regulatory requirements, had often highlighted a situation of competitive imbalance with short-term rental operators.

In light of these considerations, the data analysed suggest that the reforms introduced in 2025 had the main effect of reducing the informal and unregulated economy of the non-hotel sector, without however compromising the overall growth of tourist demand. In this sense, the evolution observed cannot be interpreted as a simple reduction in the sector's economy, but rather as a process of market reorganisation and transformation.

Consequently, the Italian non-hotel market currently appears to be in a transition phase, characterised by a shift from a model of rapid and poorly regulated growth to a more structured system integrated within national tourism policies. In the long term, this process could help to consolidate the role of tourist rentals as a stable and regulated component of the Italian accommodation system.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis conducted in this paper highlights how the legislative reforms introduced in 2025 represented a turning point in the process of regulating the Italian non-hotel accommodation market. In particular, the introduction of the National Identification Code (CIN), the strengthening of administrative traceability tools and the provisions relating to guest

identification have contributed to profoundly changing the functioning of the short-term tourist rental sector.

From an empirical point of view, the statistical data analysed show that tourism in Italy continues to record significant growth levels, both in terms of tourist numbers and international visitor spending. At the same time, non-hotel accommodation facilities continue to play a central role within the national accommodation system, representing a significant share of the overall tourist offer. However, the introduction of the new regulations has led to a reduction in irregular supply, affecting in particular those activities characterised by informal or unregistered management.

In this sense, the 2025 reforms do not seem to have led to an overall contraction of the non-hotel sector economy, but rather to a process of structural transformation of the market, oriented towards greater transparency and formalisation of accommodation activities. The introduction of tools such as the CIN allows public authorities to improve monitoring of the sector, reduce information asymmetries and promote more balanced competition between traditional hotels and tourist rental operators.

From a public policy perspective, the results of this study suggest some important implications. First, regulatory policies should strike a balance between two fundamental objectives: on the one hand, ensuring compliance with tax, administrative and safety regulations; on the other, avoiding the introduction of overly restrictive barriers that could limit innovation and competitiveness in the tourism sector. Tourist rentals are a significant economic resource for many destinations, helping to expand accommodation capacity and diversify the tourist offer.

Secondly, the Italian experience highlights the importance of developing monitoring systems based on integrated databases and digital tracking tools. The implementation of the National Identification Code is a first step towards building a more efficient information system capable of supporting evidence-based policy decisions.

Finally, future regulatory policies should be accompanied by greater cooperation between public authorities, digital platforms and industry operators in order to ensure effective enforcement of the rules and promote sustainable tourism development models in the long term. In light of these considerations, the Italian case is a significant example of how regulation can contribute not only to controlling a rapidly expanding market, but also to guiding its evolution towards more structured, transparent and sustainable forms from an economic and social point of view.

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STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING RESPONSES TO POSITIVE REVIEWS OF THE BEST HOTELS IN THE WORLD RECOGNIZED BY TRIPADVISOR IN 2024

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ABSTRACT: *This study focuses on one of the essential actions in effective management of companies' online reputation, which consists of webcare and the response strategies adopted to deal with positive comments made by consumers on review sites. Thus, the study's main objective is to identify the response strategies of the companies analyzed to positive comments published on the TripAdvisor website. The 25 best accommodation companies in the world were considered for data collection, according to the TripAdvisor website's "Travelers' Choice 2024" award. The data collection was carried out in November 2024, using user-generated content (UGC) as a source of information. The 250 responses to positive comments collected were categorized through content analysis by themes. The research followed a quantitative and qualitative approach. It was found that most companies adopt active-constructive, and professional responses. Furthermore, 64% of companies typically develop personalized responses, while the remainder opt for tailored feedback. Regarding those responsible for webcare, it was found that they ranged from general managers, internal teams, customer relationship managers, to e-concierges, quality managers, and social media managers. The results indicated that active- constructive, and more humanized and personalized responses can be more effective in creating lasting bonds with customers, encouraging repeat purchases. The study also provided recommendations for response management strategies for hospitality companies and suggestions for future research.*

Keywords: *Positive reviews. Response management. Webcare. Corporate reputation. Hotel.*

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has brought profound changes to the hospitality sector, redefining the way companies and consumers interact. In a context where information is widely available, online review platforms have emerged as indispensable tools for consumers seeking transparency, quality, and trust when selecting accommodation services (Balaji *et al*., 2016).

These review platforms, such as TripAdvisor, allow travelers to share their experiences, creating an information-sharing environment that extends beyond traditional advertising campaigns. In this context, online reviews have become a key determinant in travel planning, directly influencing consumers' perception of the quality of the services provided (Schuckert *et al*., 2015).

For this reason, it becomes essential for companies to monitor electronic word-of-mouth on these review platforms. The practice of interacting on online platforms to engage in consumer dialogue and respond to consumer reviews is known as webcare (Casado-Díaz *et al.*, 2020).

After conducting a literature review based on the analysis of 77 international studies on the topic, published between 2000 and 2020, Lopes *et al*. (2023) highlighted the need for further research focusing on the management of responses to positive reviews. They found that only one study, conducted by Wu *et al*. (2020), addressed this focus, but it concentrated on the context of the Chinese market (Lopes *et al*., 2023).

Based on this identified research gap, this study aimed to investigate the strategies used to respond to positive comments on TripAdvisor, adopted by accommodation providers ranked

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among the best worldwide in the Travelers' Choice 2024 awards.

Many companies underestimate this type of interaction, assuming that a satisfied customer does not require additional attention. However, in the study conducted by Wu *et al*. (2020), the authors found that responding strategically to positive reviews can amplify the beneficial effects of electronic word-of-mouth, fostering repeat purchases and spontaneous recommendation sharing among potential consumers.

In this regard, Wang and Chaudhry (2018) argue that managerial responses to positive comments can enhance consumers' appreciation of the company, evoke positive emotions among reviewers, and encourage subsequent or additional reviews that reinforce favorable aspects of the consumption experience.

Thus, each response to a positive comment can function as a public display visible to thousands of users. A well-structured expression of gratitude, accompanied by additional information or an invitation to return, not only reinforces customer appreciation (Xie *et al*., 2017) but also signals professionalism and attentiveness to future guests who read that response (Liu *et al*., 2015).

Therefore, analyzing response-management strategies for positive reviews becomes essential for understanding how high-performing companies leverage these interactions to strengthen their reputation and enhance their competitiveness. In this sense, based on the practices observed among the world's best hotels, recognized in the Travelers' Choice 2024 ranking, it becomes possible to identify effective patterns of practice and propose transferable guidelines for other companies in the sector.

To examine how companies respond to positive comments, this study adopted the categories defined by Wu *et al*. (2020). These authors grounded their framework in three theories. The first was the positive experience capitalization theory (or interpersonal relationship research on sharing positive experiences), which posits that receiving validating feedback on a shared positive experience enhances the reviewer's emotional well-being. The second was the reinforcement effect theory, which suggests that a positive managerial response is perceived as a reward, fostering favorable future behaviors such as repeat purchases. Finally, they drew on the automatic behavioral priming theory, which assumes that the communication style adopted can activate certain social stereotypes, as in the case of more informal and friendly responses that may evoke a sense of greater closeness between interlocutors (Wu *et al*., 2020).

According to Wu *et al*. (2020), the most common responses to positive reviews can be classified into the following styles: active-constructive, when the respondent not only expresses gratitude but also validates the consumer's positive experience, emphasizes positive service attributes, and signals support for future purchases; and passive-constructive, when the company simply thanks the customer for the purchase and the posted comment. In addition to these, the authors identify the active-destructive style, in which the company diminishes or invalidates the shared experience, and the passive-destructive style, in which the respondent ignores the review or displays no emotional involvement.

With regard to communication styles, the analysis also considered whether the responses adopted a more relational tone (affiliative, friendly, or accommodating), similar to an exchange between close acquaintances; or a more professional communication style (dominant, precise, or minimally accommodating), evoking a more formal tone, as if addressing a formal authority (Sparks *et al*., 2016; Wu *et al*., 2020).

In sum, this study is warranted by its effort to address a significant gap in the academic literature in Tourism and Hospitality. It examines the relevance of review platforms for companies in the sector - particularly the role of TripAdvisor as a global benchmark - and highlights the importance of online reputation as a source of competitive advantage.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods approach and is characterized as both exploratory and descriptive. Data were collected on the TripAdvisor platform, and the study population consisted of the twenty-five lodging establishments ranked as the "best hotels in the world" in the Travelers' Choice 2024 awards. Data collection took place between November 9 and 20, 2024.

The protocol defined the collection of the first ten most recent comments for each establishment, provided they included a managerial response. The final sample comprised 250 comments and their corresponding responses. Positive comments were identified based on reviews marked as "excellent" or "very good." All data collection procedures followed a structured protocol to ensure replicability.

To identify the categories and analyze the data, no software was used. The analysis was conducted by two researchers under a blind peer-review procedure, and the categorization enabled the identification of patterns in the management of responses to positive comments.

As shown in Figure 1, the categories and subcategories employed in the analysis were defined based on studies by authors including Silva *et al*. (2024), Lopes *et al*. (2023), Wu *et al*. (2020), Gondim and Araújo (2019), and Sparks *et al*. (2016).

Categories	Subcategories	Authors
Response management (*webcare*)	They respond to negative comments	Lopes *et al.* (2023)
	They respond to positive comments	
	They don't respond to comments.	
Scenarios for corporate responses to positive comments	Passive-constructive response	Wu *et al*. (2020)
	Active-constructive response	
	Passive-destructive response	
	Active-destructive response	
Respondent's voice style	Professional voice or dominant style, precise and not very accommodating	Sparks *et al.* (2016) Wu *et al.* (2020)
	Human conversational voice or affiliative, friendly, and accommodating style	
Adapting the response to the comment or the evaluator	Response customization	Lopes *et al.* (2023)
	Adaptation of the response	
Source or person responsible for the response	Customer Relationship Manager	Sparks *et al.* (2016) Lopes *et al.* (2023)
	General manager or owner	
	Project team (collaborator)	Gondim & Araújo (2019)
	No identification	
	Two options for those responsible	
	Undefined responsible party (multiple)	
	Quality Manager	Silva *et al.* (2024)
	Executive Assistant	

Figure 1. Pre-established categories used in the data analysis
Source: Authors' elaboration (2024).

For organizational purposes, an Excel form was developed to record the data collected from the TripAdvisor profiles of the analyzed companies. Quantitative data were organized into tables and examined using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage). Qualitative data - positive comments and their corresponding responses - were collected and organized in Word files, one document per company.

Thematic content analysis was applied to the qualitative material, following Bardin (2016). The analysis sought to identify and quantify the subcategories present in the responses, based on the predefined categorization, which allowed the identification of the most commonly adopted patterns.

Additionally, the content was examined subjectively to identify illustrative examples of responses representing each subcategory, supporting comparison with the theoretical framework and informing the development of suggested strategies for responding to positive comments.

This study adhered to the ethical principles governing research in digital environments, safeguarding the privacy and anonymity of users of review platforms as well as the companies involved. Specifically, no sensitive data or personally identifiable information was collected, and all information used was publicly accessible on the platform analyzed.

RESULTS

To describe the profile of the companies analyzed, it should be noted that among the best lodging establishments in the world recognized in TripAdvisor's 2024 awards, there were hotels and resorts located across multiple countries. Two establishments from each of the following countries were included in the ranking: Brazil, Mexico, Egypt, Cuba, Vietnam, the Maldives, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey. In the remaining countries, only one lodging establishment appeared among the awardees, namely Portugal, Cambodia, India, Peru, Aruba, China, and Morocco. All of them received the highest overall rating.

A total of 141,236 reviews were published across all analyzed profiles at the time of data collection. The vast majority of these reviews were positive, with 90.7% classified as "excellent" and 6.8% as "very good." Only a small proportion of comments fell into the "average" (1.6%), "poor" (0.5%), and "terrible" (0.4%) categories, which together accounted for just 2.5% of all reviews. These figures clearly indicate the predominance of positive evaluations, confirming the expected outcome given that the sample comprises establishments consistently recognized for their high ratings on the platform.

Notably, only 21,062 reviews (13.9% of the total) were written in Portuguese. To avoid compromising the analysis, comments and responses in other languages were translated using the platform's built-in translation tool, which enabled the inclusion of data from various regions of the world.

The analysis showed that most companies (44%) tend to respond to some reviews classified as positive or neutral, while others (28%) also reply to negative comments. Only three companies (12%) did not present any reviews classified as "poor" or "terrible" at the time of data collection.

Regarding the patterns of responses to positive comments, the analysis showed that 24 companies adopt the active-constructive response style. Only one hotel displayed a predominance of passive-constructive responses, and no cases of passive-destructive or active-destructive responses were identified (Table 1).

Table 1. Categories and subcategories identified in the responses

Categories	Subcategories	Total	%
Scenarios for corporate responses to positive	Active-constructive responses	24	96%
	Predominance of passive-constructive	1	4%
Respondent's voice style	Professional voice or dominant style	22	88%
	Human conversational voice or affiliative	3	12%
Adapting the response to the comment or the evaluator	Response customization	16	64%
	Adaptation of the response	6	24%
	Predominance of personalized responses	1	4%
	Predominance of adapted responses	2	8%
Source or person responsible for the response	Customer Relationship/Experience	3	12%
	General manager or owner	8	32%
	Project Team/Squad/Family	4	16%
	No identification	5	20%
	Two options for those responsible	2	8%
	Quality Manager	1	4%
	E-concierge	1	4%
	Head of the CRM and Social Media	1	4%

Source: Research data (2024).

A passive-constructive response, although acknowledging the positive experience shared, tends to convey limited enthusiasm or emotional engagement. As a result, while it remains a simple and polite expression of gratitude, it misses the opportunity to strengthen the relationship with the customer, thus reducing the likelihood of encouraging repeat purchases. (Wu *et al*., 2020).

Regarding the respondent's tone of voice, only three companies were identified as typically replying in a more informal manner, adopting a more relational and friendly tone. The remaining companies follow a more formal response pattern, possibly to maintain or project a higher degree of professionalism in their customer service.

In the study by Sparks *et al*. (2016), the authors found that a conversational or informal response style is perceived as more empathetic and more effective than a professional or formal writing style. The following illustrates an example of an active-constructive response that also adopts an affiliative tone:

> *Hello! Thank you so much for rating us and for so many compliments, our hearts are truly warmed by receiving so much affection. Ah, everything here is really amazing, right? From the service to our All Inclusive, every detail is crafted with great care 😉 We loved having you here and we hope you come back many more times 🩹.*

In the response, it is possible to identify elements that convey a warmer and more informal tone, such as expressions like "we loved having you here," "our hearts are truly warmed," and "we hope you come back many more times." It is also important to highlight the presence of emojis as visual elements that reinforce the positive feelings expressed in the message. Moreover, the effects of humor and the use of emojis in communication between companies and consumers remain underexplored in the literature (Lopes *et al*., 2023).

As Wu *et al*. (2020) explain, a more human conversational style can signal greater appreciation for the consumer's opinion and enhance the perceived authenticity of the response by suggesting a sense of closeness between the parties involved.

Drawing on the findings of Sparks *et al*. (2016), the authors explicitly recommended the use of a more humanized voice, as responses employing this style demonstrated a stronger positive impact on consumers' perceptions. This style was viewed as more natural, empathetic, and open to dialogue, contributing to increased trust in the company and to consumers' perception of attentiveness.

An example of an active-constructive response that exhibits a more professional writing style is presented below:

> *Dear [guest name], Thank you very much for your kind words. We are delighted to know that you had a fantastic evening and enjoyed the delicious food and exceptional service. We will certainly pass your compliments on to [employee name], he will be happy to know that he made your evening even more special. Your recommendation means a lot, and we look forward to welcoming you back for another memorable experience. Sincerely, [respondent name] General Manager.*

In this case, the response was personalized by referencing specific details from the review. It should be emphasized that, according to Wang and Chaudhry (2018), positive comments vary considerably, as consumers who post such evaluations have different motivations, such as praising the company and/or its employees, offering suggestions for positive lodging experiences, or even assisting other potential customers in choosing their accommodation. The authors therefore recommend that responses be personalized, demonstrating that the comments were indeed read and that the company values its guests' opinions.

With regard to the sources of the responses, in eight companies the managers or owners were responsible for webcare activities, which may account for the use of a more formal and professional tone, consistent with the high-responsibility positions they hold. In four of the cases analyzed, the respondent identified themselves as part of the team, staff, or family of the establishment. In five situations, the responses did not include any author identification. In three lodging establishments, the respondents held positions as relationship or customer experience managers, and in two companies more than one role was responsible for providing the responses.

Notably, new subcategories emerged during the analysis regarding the type of person responsible for the responses, including e-concierge, and head of the CRM (Customer Relationship Management) and social media department. These findings indicate that positions such as electronic concierge (e-concierge) or social media relationship manager are becoming increasingly evident.

It was also observed that in sixteen establishments the responses were found to be personalized for each comment analyzed. In one hotel, personalized responses predominated, although some were partially adapted. The adaptation of responses was the pattern followed by six companies, and in one of them this constituted the predominant form of feedback. Adapted responses are those that follow a single standardized text, often repeated without distinguishing elements or with only minor variations. Consequently, they consist of generic expressions of gratitude and lack elements of individualization.

The following is an example of an active-constructive response, written in a professional style, which is classified as adapted due to its repeated use across multiple situations and includes the identification of the establishment's team as the respondent:

> *Dear Mrs. [guest name], Our team is faithful to our first commandment, which is: To Serve with Love, and we are immensely happy that your words exalt and honor our daily actions to make your experience memorable. We are privileged to welcome you, please come back soon! With Affection, [lodging name] Team.*

Still regarding the scenario of responses to positive comments, it is useful to present two examples of passive-constructive webcare, which are presented sequentially below:

> *Dear [guest name], Thank you very much for your comment, I hope and wish that you enjoyed our terrace and the charms of the hotel. Kind regards.*
>
> *Dear [guest name], Thank you very much for sharing your opinion. The beautiful city of [city name] is home to the most beautiful places in all of [country name]. Our hotel is no exception, and if you want to relax and enjoy good food, this is the right place. Kind regards.*

Although such responses express gratitude for the guest's comment, they do not foster ongoing customer engagement, and the establishment ultimately misses the opportunity to encourage repeat purchases.

Drawing on this analysis of the strategies used by the companies to respond to positive reviews, together with evidence from previous studies, this examination enabled the development of several insights for managers and professionals in the sector, which are presented below.

DISCUSSION

In a highly digitalized market, effectively managing customer interaction through strategic responses to reviews has become a competitive advantage in the hospitality industry. The lodging establishments analyzed hold a positive reputation, as evidenced by their TripAdvisor awards, high ratings, and the predominance of positive reviews on the platform.

The analysis indicated that responses to positive comments play an important role in sustaining a favorable reputation, contributing to customer loyalty and encouraging new interactions and greater engagement. The results further showed that most of the companies analyzed tend to use active-constructive responses to positive comments. This approach aligns with the recommendations of the earlier study by Wu *et al*. (2020). Such a response style is commonly associated with a higher intention to repurchase, eliciting positive emotions among consumers and contributing to the strengthening of a favorable organizational reputation.

The data also revealed that, although the companies analyzed frequently provide responses to positive comments, not all of them adopt a consistent and personalized approach. As previously discussed in this analysis, when responses are well crafted - using an active-constructive style and a more humanized tone - they enhance the guest experience and can strengthen the emotional connection with the hotel.

In accordance with Lopes *et al*. (2023), the webcare literature still presents controversies regarding the personalization or adaptation of responses. This stems from the fact that standardized or adapted responses can convey either an image of professionalism or one of indifference.

Despite this finding, it was observed that a considerable number of establishments employ adapted and generic responses, in addition to a more formal and distant style in their replies. Although this practice is understandable given the large volume of positive comments posted, it may ultimately reduce the potential of these interactions, as such responses convey less authenticity and may therefore diminish customers' emotional engagement with these companies.

In this regard, personalized responses written in a more humanized tone may serve as more effective strategies for reinforcing affective bonds and increasing consumer trust, as demonstrated in the studies by Sparks *et al*. (2016) and Wu *et al*. (2020).

The study revealed a diverse range of roles involved in managing responses, including

general managers, customer relationship teams, and specialized CRM or social media departments. It is worth emphasizing that the emergence of new positions dedicated to response management may signal an advancement in the professionalization of webcare, reflecting a promising trend within the sector.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis of the research data, it was found that there is room for improvement in webcare, particularly with regard to personalization and empathy in responses. Standardized and formally styled replies, although polite, miss the opportunity to generate genuine engagement and to strengthen digital reputation effectively.

As recommendations for webcare strategies derived from the study, it is suggested that lodging companies: prioritize personalized responses, valuing the individual experiences shared by each guest; adopt a more humanized and empathetic tone, using resources such as emojis or colloquial expressions in moderation to create a perception of greater closeness; establish consistent communication guidelines capable of maintaining quality without limiting authenticity; and invest in employee training or create dedicated teams for this function, recognizing webcare as a strategic component of customer relationship management and as fundamental to maintaining a strong online reputation.

Future research should examine the impact of humor and the use of emojis in responses, as this topic remains underexplored (Lopes *et al*., 2023). Another avenue for research is to analyze response management across different review platforms (such as Booking.com, Google Reviews, Expedia, etc.). Research could also assess consumers' perceptions of different response styles, given the existing divergences in the literature.

Finally, studies could investigate the extent to which companies are already using generative artificial intelligence in their webcare practices and the potential effects of such use on organizational reputation.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights derived from observing the practices adopted by the world's leading lodging establishments, offering guidance for managers seeking to enhance communication with their customers.

The study concludes that responding appropriately to positive reviews extends far beyond courtesy, functioning as a strategic action capable of differentiating a company in the digital marketplace. The findings underscore the importance of a response management approach that is attentive, empathetic, and consumer-experience-driven in the digital environment.

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DETERMINANTS OF HOTEL EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION OF CSR - EVIDENCE FROM NOVI SAD, SERBIA

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ABSTRACT: *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reflects an organization's commitment to economic, legal, philanthropic, and ethical responsibilities towards employees, society, and other stakeholders. Despite its importance, empirical evidence on how socio-demographic and job-related characteristics shape hotel employees' perception of CSR remains scarce, particularly in crisis contexts and in transition economies such as Serbia. Thus, the main aim of the present study was to investigate hotel employees' perception of CSR during the COVID-19 pandemic and explore differences based on socio-demographic and job-related characteristics. The sample consisted of 131 employees working in hotels in Novi Sad, Serbia. Survey data were collected from March to December 2020 and analyzed using SPSS version 23.0. The results indicated that employees perceived the Legal dimension of CSR most strongly, while the Philanthropic dimension was perceived to the least extent. Also, significant differences in the perception of Economic, Legal, Philanthropic, and Ethical dimensions were found based on marital status, monthly income, and career development aspirations. These findings extend CSR research by demonstrating the relevance of employee-level heterogeneity in crisis contexts and highlight the importance of tailoring CSR initiatives to employee characteristics in order to enhance engagement, perceived fairness, and organizational resilience.*

KEYWORDS: *corporate social responsibility (CSR), hotel employees, socio-demographic characteristics, job-related characteristics, Serbia*

INTRODUCTION

Employees' perception of corporate social responsibility (CSR) represents a key factor shaping their attitudes and behavior towards the organization (Yaoqi & Hui, 2014). Compared to other sectors, the tourism industry is both a service-oriented and resource-dependent, and it involves a wide range of stakeholders (Henderson, 2007). Thus, while pursuing economic objectives, tourism enterprises must pay careful attention to social and environmental responsibilities (Shin et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2025).

The present study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a context that heightened the importance of CSR, as employees faced increased uncertainty and organizations were expected to demonstrate legal compliance, ethical behavior, and responsibility towards the community. Ou et al. (2021) argued that effective CSR practices can reduce employees' stress during crises and strengthen the confidence of external stakeholders, including society and suppliers.

Despite extensive research on CSR, relatively few studies have examined how employees' socio-demographic and job-related characteristics shape their perception of CSR in the tourism sector, particularly in crisis periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Employees' gender, age, income, position within the organization, and career advancement opportunities may influence how they interpret CSR practices, yet empirical evidence on these differences remains limited.

Differences in CSR perception may stem from variations in personal responsibilities, job security concerns, and career expectations. In crisis contexts, employees with different socio-demographic and career profiles may evaluate organizational responsibility through the

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lens of economic stability, legal protection, and long-term professional prospects. Therefore, individual characteristics may shape how CSR practices are interpreted and prioritized.

The present study contributes to the literature by investigating hotel employees' perception of CSR during the COVID-19 pandemic and by exploring differences based on socio-demographic and job-related characteristics. Understanding these differences can help hotel management tailor CSR initiatives more effectively, which may support employee well-being and strengthen organizational resilience in times of crisis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CSR refers to the way organizations integrate legal compliance, ethical principles, environmental concerns, and community-oriented values into their business activities. Also, CSR encompasses activities that organizations undertake to improve the well-being of the wider community, often beyond the direct interests of the organization and minimum legal requirements (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). This understanding suggests that socially responsible activities are not necessarily aimed at profit maximization, although profit remains one of the main objectives of business operations. However, despite the possibility of short-term reductions in financial benefits, an increasing number of organizations choose to adopt the principles of CSR (Al Masud et al., 2025; Mitchell et al., 1997; Paine, 2002).

Although generating profit is a necessary condition for the survival of companies, contemporary organizations are at the same time expected to align their operations with legal regulations and societal values (Fisher, 2003). The modern business environment requires organizations to go beyond a purely profit-oriented approach and engage in activities that contribute to broader social well-being and community development (Robins, 2005). Organizations that apply CSR strive to balance the interests of the organization itself, employees, customers, and suppliers, while simultaneously engaging in charitable activities, supporting the local community, and promoting environmental protection (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2009).

According to Carroll (1999), CSR is a multidimensional concept that includes economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. Economic responsibility refers to long-term business sustainability and profitability, legal responsibility involves compliance with existing laws and regulations, while ethical responsibility implies behavior that is consistent with societal norms and expectations, even when these are not formally regulated. Philanthropic responsibility includes voluntary activities aimed at improving community well-being and quality of life.

Employees represent one of the most important stakeholder groups (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001), as through direct interaction with customers they influence the formation of customer attitudes and perceptions. Thus, employees' perception of CSR should not be overlooked (Dawson & Abbott, 2009). Within the tourism industry, hotels devote significant efforts to the implementation of CSR programs, and these programs enhance their public image through activities such as recycling, providing support for local communities, promoting workplace diversity, producing organic products, and making charitable donations (Inoue & Lee, 2011; McGehee et al., 2009; Nicolau, 2008). Consequently, CSR can serve as an important tool for market differentiation and gaining a competitive advantage, particularly in times of economic crisis and under pressures of globalization (Marakova et al., 2022; Mijatov Ladičorbić et al., 2024).

Its relevance becomes even more pronounced during specific crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when organizations face heightened expectations regarding legal compliance, ethical conduct, and social responsibility towards employees and communities.

Prior research suggests that CSR practices in crisis contexts contribute to organizational resilience and support stakeholder trust, while also helping employees cope with increased uncertainty and stress (Krikonis et al., 2025; Ou et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2021).

While CSR has been widely conceptualized, empirical research focusing on the role of socio-demographic characteristics in shaping employees' perception of CSR remains limited. Mijatov Ladičorbić et al. (2024) found that hotel employees' age, education level, and monthly income influence their perception of CSR. A similar study conducted among employees in a telecommunications company identified age as a significant factor shaping employees' perception of CSR (Enriquez, 2020). Besides, research focusing on top management provides further support for the role of socio-demographic characteristics, as Bouzguenda and Jarboui (2024) showed that CEOs' age, tenure, and education level positively influence their engagement with CSR.

Moreover, job-related characteristics, such as employees' position within the organization and career advancement opportunities, may influence their perception of CSR (Lloyd et al., 2008). CSR initiatives experienced as a bottom-up process have been shown to enhance employees' sense of meaningfulness, thereby positively shaping CSR perception (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). Additionally, studies indicate that front employees' perception of CSR is positively associated with self-efficacy and adaptive service behaviors, which has been linked to stronger CSR engagement and more proactive, effective workplace performance (Zhang et al., 2022). Based on these, the following hypotheses are formulated:

Hypothesis 1: There are significant differences in employees' perception of CSR based on their socio-demographic characteristics.

Hypothesis 2: There are significant differences in employees' perception of CSR based on the main characteristic of their job.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument

The first part of the questionnaire comprised questions related to the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, including gender, age, level of education, size of place of residence, marital status, and monthly income. Also, respondents were asked whether their educational background was related to the field of tourism and hospitality, as well as about the category of the hotel in which they are employed and the number of years of work experience in their current hotel.

Besides, the questionnaire included items related to respondents' job characteristics within the hotel. These items assessed whether respondents' job positions involve direct interaction with guests, their role within the organizational hierarchy (i.e., having a superior, subordinates, or both), and the perceived availability of opportunities for career advancement within their current position. Moreover, it was examined whether respondents were willing to engage in professional development in the event of a potential career advancement opportunity.

The second group of questions addressed CSR and was based on the widely recognized Caroll's Model of Social Performance (Carroll, 1979), covering four dimensions: economic, legal, philanthropic, and ethical. CSR items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Procedure

Survey research was conducted from March to December 2020 using both paper-pencil questionnaires, which were distributed in hotels in the city of Novi Sad, Serbia, and the online questionnaire created in Google Forms, which was shared on social media platforms (Facebook,

Instagram). Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of anonymity and voluntary participation.

Data were analyzed using SPSS 23. Statistical analyses included Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), descriptive statistics, and ANOVA tests.

Sample

This research forms part of a broader study. The sample consisted of 131 hotel employees, with the majority being female (67.9%) and the remaining male (32.1%). Respondents' ages ranged widely, with an average of 30.89 years. A convenience sampling method was applied, and respondents were recruited from several hotels operating in Novi Sad.

RESULTS

Exploratory Factor Analysis

To identify the factors of corporate social responsibility, an EFA was conducted. The analysis used principal component extraction with Varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization. The results showed a Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy of .924, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p=0.000$; $\chi 2(136)=2157.496$). In accordance with the recommendations of Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) and Pallant (2013), items with factor loadings above 0.3 were retained. The analysis identified four factors: Economic dimension of corporate social responsibility, Legal dimension of corporate social responsibility, Philanthropic dimension of corporate social responsibility, and Ethical dimension of corporate social responsibility, which together explained 81.022% of the total variance. Also, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each CRS factor ranged from .867 to .938, confirming the reliability of the extracted factors (Table 1).

Table 1. EFA results and Cronbach's alpha for CSR factors

	Economic CSR (α=.867)	Legal CSR (α=.933)	Philanthropic CSR (α=.938)	Ethical CSR (α=.937)
My organization generates employment impact.	.700			
My organization strives to cover operational costs.	.848			
My organization strives to improve employee productivity.	.606			
My organization establishes a long-term strategy for economic growth.	.674			
My organization complies with business regulations.		.803		
My organization operates in accordance with labor laws (regarding employment and employees' rights).		.776		
My organization advocates operating in accordance with legal contracts.		.784		
My organization has established rules and methods for working with customers.		.740		

My organization provides various donations.			.836	
My organization participates in campaigns to help people in need.			.878	
My organization strives to support the local community.			.794	
My organization participates in volunteer activities.			.842	
My organization operates in line with societal expectations, customs, and ethical norms.				.711
My organization operates by understanding and respecting new ethical/moral norms adopted by society.				.718
My organization prevents the violation of ethical norms for the purpose of achieving corporate goals.				.831
My organization understands that corporate behavior implies operating in a manner considered moral and ethical.				.665
My organization understands that corporate integrity and ethical behavior go far beyond mere compliance with laws and regulations.				.737

Note: CSR=Corporate Social Responsibility.

Based on the factor structure and the content of the items, the extracted factors were interpreted as four dimensions of CSR. Each dimension reflects a specific aspect of employees' perception of CSR.

The first factor represents the *Economic dimension of CSR* and reflects employees' perception of the organization's commitment to economic sustainability and long-term growth. It includes efforts to cover operational costs, improve employee productivity, generate employment impact, and establish long-term economic strategies. This dimension indicates whether employees perceive the organization as economically responsible and stable.

The second factor was interpreted as the *Legal dimension of CSR*, capturing employees' perception of the organization's compliance with laws, regulations, and formal obligations. It encompasses adherence to business regulations, labor laws, legal contracts, and established rules for working with customers, reflecting the organization's commitment to lawful and transparent operations.

The third factor corresponds to the *Philanthropic dimension of CSR* and refers to employees' perception of the organization's voluntary engagement in activities that support the wider community. This includes donations, participation in campaigns and volunteer activities, and efforts to support the local community, indicating the organization's contribution to social well-being beyond core business activities.

The fourth factor represents the *Ethical dimension of CSR* and reflects employees' perception of the organization's commitment to ethical behavior beyond legal requirements. It

reflects adherence to societal norms and moral standards, prevention of unethical practices, and an emphasis on integrity and ethical conduct as core organizational values.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the overall level of employees' perception of each CSR dimension. The main findings are represented within Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for CSR dimensions

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Economic dimension of CSR	3.59	.831
Legal dimension of CSR	4.04	.876
Philanthropic dimension of CSR	3.25	1.07
Ethical dimension of CSR	3.82	.845

The results indicated that employees perceived the Legal dimension of CSR most strongly, which points to a high awareness of organizational compliance with laws, regulations, and formal obligations. This was followed by the Ethical dimension of CSR, which reflects employees' recognition of ethical conduct and integrity beyond legal compliance. The Economic dimension was perceived at a moderate level and reflects a balanced view of organizational efforts related to economic sustainability and long-term growth. On the other hand, the Philanthropic dimension of CSR had the lowest mean score, which suggests that voluntary community-oriented and charitable activities were perceived as less prominent than other CSR dimensions.

ANOVA and LSD tests

To examine whether employees' perception of CSR dimensions differs based on socio-demographic and job-related characteristics, one-way ANOVA analyses were conducted, followed by post-hoc (LSD) test. An overview of the main findings is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. ANOVA and LSD post hoc results for CSR dimensions

		F - value	**Sig.**	**LSD post hoc**
Marital status	Economic dimension of CSR	3.683	.007	3<1,2,4
	Legal dimension of CSR	5.315	.001	3<1,2,4
	Philanthropic dimension of CSR	2.687	.034	2>3; 4>1,3
	Ethical dimension of CSR	3.060	.019	3<1,2,4
Monthly income	Economic dimension of CSR	5.667	.004	2>1,3
	Legal dimension of CSR	5.179	.007	2>1,3
	Ethical dimension of CSR	3.573	.031	2>3
Career development	Legal dimension of CSR	5.065	.008	1>3

Employees who live in extramarital union showed stronger perception of Economic, Legal, and Ethical dimensions of CSR compared to those who are single, in a relationship, and married. Also, employees who are in a relationship showed stronger perception of Philanthropic dimension of CSR than those who live in extramarital union, while married employees showed higher perception compared to single employees and those in extramarital union.

In terms of monthly income, employees with average income perceived Economic and Legal dimensions of CSR to a greater extent than those with above-average and below-average income. Besides, they perceived Ethical dimension of CSR to a greater extent compared to employees with below-average income.

Moreover, employees who are willing to develop skills and pursue career advancement perceived Legal dimension of CSR to a greater extent compared to those who are unsure about their development.

DISCUSSION

The present study contributes to the quite limited literature on the role of employees' socio-demographic and job-related characteristics in shaping their perception of CSR dimensions, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when hotels faced heightened operational challenges and employees experienced increased anxiety, stress, and uncertainty (Krikonis et al., 2025; Ou et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2021).

Firstly, it was shown that employees perceived the Philanthropic dimension of CSR to the least extent, which could suggest that employees view voluntary community-oriented and charitable activities as less visible or emphasized compared to Economic, Legal, and Ethical dimensions of CSR. This may indicate that hotels focus more on regulatory compliance, ethical standards, and operational stability, while community engagement and charitable initiatives were not a central priority during the pandemic period.

Secondly, the results revealed significant differences in employees' perception of Economic, Legal, Philanthropic, and Ethical dimensions of CSR based on marital status. These findings are partially consistent with the study by Hegde and Mishra (2019), who showed that married CEOs tend to demonstrate a stronger commitment to CSR practices. Also, Poorsoltan et al. (1991) suggested that married employees may exhibit a higher level of conservatism, as unethical behavior could jeopardize their job position and threaten the financial security of the family. On the other hand, the present findings contradict the study by Mijatov Ladičorbić et al. (2024), which found no significant differences in employees' perception of CSR dimensions based on marital status among hotel employees in Serbia. This discrepancy may be explained by differences in the research context, such as variations in hotel types and sample characteristics, as the present study focused on employees working in hotels located in the city of Novi Sad, while the study by Mijatov Ladičorbić et al. (2024) was conducted in mountain hotels on Kopaonik. Besides, the timing of data collection may have influenced the results, as the present study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period in which CSR practices were increasingly perceived as essential for organizational responsibility and stability.

In this context, previous research has emphasized the importance of CSR during crisis situations. For instance, Marco-Lajara et al. (2021) demonstrated that the development of a CSR strategy had a positive and significant impact on the resilience of accommodation providers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that heightened awareness of CSR during periods of uncertainty may have shaped employees' perception of Economic, Legal, Philanthropic, and Ethical dimensions of CSR and contributed to the observed differences. Thirdly, the findings revealed significant differences in the perception of Economic, Legal, and Ethical dimensions of CSR with regard to employees' monthly income. Particularly, employees

with average income perceived Economic and Legal dimensions of CSR to a greater extent than those with below-average and above-average income, while they also demonstrated a stronger perception of Ethical dimension of CSR compared to employees with below-average income. These results are partially consistent with the study by Mijatov Ladičorbić et al. (2024), which identified differences in the perception of the Legal dimension of CSR based on monthly income. One possible explanation is that employees with average income may be more sensitive to organizational practices related to economic stability, legal compliance, and ethical conduct, as these aspects are closely connected to job security, fair treatment, and long-term employment conditions. On the contrary, employees with above-average income may perceive themselves as more financially secure and therefore less dependent on organizational economic and legal practices, while employees with below-average income may prioritize immediate economic outcomes over broader ethical considerations.

Fourthly, the results indicated that employees who demonstrated a stronger willingness to develop their skills and pursue career advancement perceived the Legal dimension of CSR to a greater extent compared to those who were less certain about their development. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting a positive association between employees' perception of CSR and career-related outcomes, such as career satisfaction (Al-Ghazali & Sohail, 2021) and motivation to take on leadership roles within the organization (Davis et al., 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to CSR literature by emphasizing the role of employee-level heterogeneity in shaping CSR perception during crisis situations. The results could be interpreted as practical implications for hotel managers, particularly in crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given that the Philanthropic dimension of CSR was perceived to the least extent, hotel management should ensure a more balanced approach to all CSR dimensions. For instance, community-oriented initiatives, such as cooperation with local institutions, donations, or employee volunteering programs, should be more visible and clearly communicated internally in order to strengthen employees' awareness.

Also, the identified differences in CSR perception based on marital status and monthly income suggest the need for consistent and inclusive CSR communication across all employee groups. Thus, managers should promote transparency regarding economic stability, legal compliance, and ethical standards through regular briefings, internal workshops, and training sessions. For instance, emphasizing fairness, equal treatment, and shared organizational values may help reduce perceptual gaps among employees at different life stages and income levels.

Moreover, the results showed that employees with stronger career development aspirations tend to pay greater attention to rules and formal organizational procedures, which reflects a stronger perception of the Legal dimension of CSR. Therefore, if the hotel clearly connects respect for legal requirements and ethical standards with career advancement opportunities, employees are more likely to perceive responsible and lawful behavior as an integral part of professional success.

The study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to hotels in a single city, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, data were collected using self-report measures, which may be subject to common method bias. Future research should consider larger and more diverse samples and multi-source data collection.

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PERFORMANCE INDICATORS IN LODGING: OPERATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR SERVICE EXCELLENCE

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ABSTRACT: *This study analyzed the performance indicators adopted by all-inclusive resorts in the state of Alagoas, based on the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) perspective. Considering the growth of tourism in the region and the strategic relevance of hospitality for the local economy, the research sought to understand how these enterprises monitor their performance and use metrics to support managerial decision-making. The field investigation was carried out through a structured questionnaire sent to managers of resorts registered in CADASTUR. Of the seven enterprises identified, three participated in the survey, representing 42.86% of the population analyzed. The results indicate that financial indicators such as revenue, profitability, occupancy rate, ADR and RevPAR are widely used. Non-financial indicators, especially related to customer satisfaction and operational efficiency, are also frequently applied. However, the perspective of learning and growth presents less structuring. The Balanced Scorecard shows potential to align strategic objectives with daily operations, although challenges such as resistance to change, technological limitations and difficulties in data collection still persist. The conclusion is that the integration between financial and non-financial indicators strengthens strategic management and competitiveness in the hotel sector.*

KEYWORDS: *Balanced Scorecard; Hotel Management; Performance Indicators; Resorts; Strategic Management*

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to analyze the performance indicators adopted by all-inclusive resorts in the state of Alagoas, having as theoretical reference the principles of the Balanced Scorecard (BSC), proposed by Kaplan and Norton (1996). Seeking to understand the practical application of these indicators in the management of enterprises and evaluate their impact on administrative efficiency.

The Balanced Scorecard (BSC), developed by Kaplan and Norton (1996), proposes an integrated approach to strategic management based on four perspectives: finance, clients, internal processes and learning and growth. Unlike traditional models focused solely on financial indicators, BSC broadens the organizational vision by incorporating non-financial metrics that are fundamental to business sustainability. In this perspective, the model is no longer understood only as an instrument for measuring performance and has been configured as a strategic management system, capable of translating the vision and organizational strategy into articulated and coherent objectives and indicators (Kaplan; Norton, 1996).

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The survey is conducted with the managers of all-inclusive resorts located in the state of Alagoas. According to data from the Register of Tourism Service Providers of the Ministry of Tourism (CADASTUR, 2024), Alagoas currently has seven resorts officially registered. It should be noted that, in accordance with current legislation, the means of accommodation are directed to carry out registration in CADASTUR with the Ministry of Tourism, this being a legal requirement for the regular operation of the activity. Thus, the initial universe of the survey includes the seven resorts registered until 2024, considering criteria of availability and access to management for the application of questionnaires.

The state of Alagoas has shown significant growth in tourism. Data from *Embratur* and the Alagoas Tourism State Secretariat (SETUR, 2024) indicate an increase of 99% in the flow of foreign tourists in the first bimester of 2024, representing 31% of the total tourist flow of the previous year. Zumbi dos Palmares airport recorded more than three thousand embarks and disembarks in this period. According to *CVC Viagens*, Alagoas was the most sold tourist destination in Brazil at the beginning of 2024, surpassing traditional destinations such as Rio de Janeiro and Salvador. Such information reinforces the relevance of the research for the tourism and hotel sector in the region.

The analysis of the indicators used in the all-inclusive resorts of Alagoas will provide significant contributions to the areas of administration, accounting, tourism, hospitality and for the academic community. The results are expected to allow managers to improve their performance indicators, identify new management tools to increase operational efficiency, as well as improve the monitoring and control of operations, enhancing companies' competitiveness.

The application of the Balanced Scorecard could favor a more efficient monitoring, contributing to greater competitiveness and sustainability in the hotel sector, also will contribute to the qualification of professionals in the area, offering relevant insights for academic and professional training in tourism and hotel management.

Considering the importance of performance indicators, especially in hotel companies located in regions of significant tourism growth, such as the Brazilian Northeast, the central question of this research is: **What are the performance measurement indicators used by the resorts of Alagoas and what challenges are faced in their applicability as management tools, in light of the Balanced Scorecard theory, for improving the performance of these hotels?**

To answer this question, specific objectives have been defined that guide the collection and analysis of information, focusing on identifying the processing of data from performance measurement systems, characterizing the adopted control and evaluation systems, as well as in the analysis of the use of these indicators in the decision-making process, under the theoretical perspective of BSC. The research will also examine the challenges faced for the efficient implementation of BSC as a strategic management tool.

METHODOLOGY

The research is characterized as exploratory and descriptive, aiming to identify and analyze the performance indicators used by all-inclusive resorts in the state of Alagoas, in light of the Balanced Scorecard.

As for the procedures, the study combined bibliographic research and online field research. The theoretical review was based on works and articles about Balanced Scorecard, performance indicators and hotel management. The field survey was carried out through a structured questionnaire sent by email to the managers of resorts registered with CADASTUR.

The universe of the research included seven resorts located in Alagoas, of which three

participated in the study, composing the sample by accessibility criteria. The collection instrument contained both open and closed questions, with a predominance of closed ones, enabling quantitative analysis.

The data were organized into electronic spreadsheets and analyzed descriptively, with frequency calculation and basic statistical measures. The interpretation of the results was carried out based on the four perspectives of the Balanced Scorecard: financial, clients, internal processes and learning and growth.

RESULTS

The data collected show that 66.7% of participating resorts claim to have a formal performance measurement system, while 33.3% still perform follow-up in an unstructured way. Despite this, all enterprises (100%) use electronic spreadsheets, especially Excel, as the main control tool, which demonstrates the absence of integrated management systems.

In the financial perspective, there was a strong predominance of traditional indicators. Total revenue, profitability and operating costs are monitored by 100% of respondents, revealing consistent focus on economic sustainability of the business. Indicators such as net profit and return on investment (ROI) are used by 66.7% of resorts, indicating concern with efficiency and strategic return on operations.

From the clients' perspective, all projects are accompanied by indicators of overall guest satisfaction, demonstrating recognition of customer experience as a central factor of competitiveness in the all-inclusive segment. In addition, 66.7% monitor loyalty rates and reviews on digital platforms such as booking websites and social networks, highlighting attention to online reputation and recurrence of consumption.

As for internal processes, the most recurring indicators are occupancy rate (100%), average check-in and check-out time (66.7%) and compliance with quality standards (66.7%). These data indicate concern with operational efficiency and standardization of services, although there is no widespread adoption of more strategic metrics related to innovation or continuous improvement.

In the perspective of learning and growth, all resorts follow the satisfaction of employees, recognizing the importance of human capital in providing tourism services. Indicators such as completed training and turnover rate appear in 66.7% of the responses, demonstrating moderate attention to talent development and retention.

Among the main reported challenges are the constant maintenance of service quality and the management of guest expectations (100%), critical factors in the all-inclusive model. The resistance of employees to changes was pointed out by 66.7% of managers, highlighting cultural barriers to the implementation of more structured systems of strategic management.

In general, the results show predominance of financial and customer satisfaction indicators, while the prospects for internal processes and learning and growth have a lower level of systematization, suggesting opportunities for improvement in the integral application of the Balanced Scorecard.

DISCUSSION

The results show that the analyzed resorts concentrate their efforts mainly on financial and client perspectives, highlighting focus on profitability and guest experience. However, there is less formal structuring of the perspectives of internal processes and learning and growth, which may limit the strategic potential of BSC.

The predominance of the use of electronic spreadsheets reveals absence of integrated management systems, which can compromise more in-depth and real-time analyses. In

addition, cultural resistance to change and the limitation of technological resources constitute barriers to full implementation of the Balanced Scorecard.

Despite these limitations, there is a gradual alignment between financial and non-financial indicators, demonstrating increasing maturity in regional hotel management.

Table 1. Performance indicators by Balanced Scorecard perspective

Perspective	**Main Indicators**	**N**	**%**
Finance	Total revenue; Profitability; Operating costs	3	100
	Net profit; ROI	2	66.7
Clients	Overall guest satisfaction	3	100
	Loyalty; Online reviews	2	66.7
Internal Processes	Occupancy rate	3	100
	Check-in/check-out time; Quality standards	2	66.7
Learning and Growth	Employee satisfaction	3	100
	Training; Rotation	2	66.7

Table 1 shows that resorts concentrate greater effort in the measurement of financial results and customer satisfaction, dimensions traditionally associated with immediate performance and short-term competitiveness. In contrast, the perspectives of internal processes and learning and growth show a lower degree of systematization, which suggests partial application of the logic of the Balanced Scorecard. Such a configuration may indicate more operational than strategic focus, limiting the model's potential as an integrated long-term management tool.

Table 2. Key challenges in performance measurement

Challenge Identified	**N**	**%**
Maintenance of service quality	3	100
Management of guest expectations	3	100
Resistance of employees to change	2	66.7

As shown in Table 2, the challenges focus mainly on maintaining quality and aligning guest expectations, which are central to the all-inclusive model, as well as cultural barriers related to organizational change.

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The predominance of the use of electronic spreadsheets reveals absence of integrated management systems, which can compromise more in-depth and real-time analyses. In addition, cultural resistance to change and the limitation of technological resources constitute barriers to full implementation of the Balanced Scorecard.

Despite these limitations, there is a gradual alignment between financial and non-financial indicators, demonstrating increasing maturity in regional hotel management.

CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to identify the performance measurement indicators used by all-inclusive resorts in the state of Alagoas and analyze the challenges related to their applicability as a management tool, in light of the Balanced Scorecard. In a competitive and customer

experience-driven environment, it was found that structured performance measurement is an essential element for the operational efficiency and sustainability of the sector.

The results highlighted the relevance of implementing a structured measurement system, based on metrics aligned with industry demands. It is found that 66.7% of the resorts analyzed use a Performance Measurement System (SMD), while 33.3% do not yet have this practice, although they recognize its importance. It is also noted that the recommendation for adoption of the system came, in part, from the parent company, with Excel being used by 100% of respondents as the main tool in the absence of specific software. Among the challenges faced, we highlight the management of guest expectations (100%), the maintenance of quality standards (100%) and the resistance of employees to change (66.7%), factors that reinforce the need for greater integration between strategic management and operation. Managers' attention is not limited to financial performance, but extends to customer experience, quality of service and loyalty and key elements for competitiveness in the sector.

With regard to the indicators applied, both financial and non-financial metrics are used, demonstrating a relatively balanced management. Among the main ones, the occupancy rate (100%), guest satisfaction (100%) and operating profit margin (66.7%) stand out, indicators that highlight focus on efficiency and profitability. In addition, the adoption of monitoring tools such as reviews on digital platforms (66.7%) and internal questionnaires (33.3%), confirms resorts' ongoing effort to enhance guest experience.

Given this situation, we can see that using performance indicators is fundamental to improve management, ensure sustainability and increase the competitiveness of the hotel sector in Alagoas. Even though there are still operational and cultural challenges, the Balanced Scorecard is an efficient tool to connect strategic objectives to day-to-day activities, offering a more complete and integrated view of the organization.

Finally, future studies should extend the investigation to other resorts in the Northeast region, enabling regional comparisons and a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of indicators in hotel management, as well as in the strengthening of tourism as a strategic activity for regional socioeconomic development.

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OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES OF SLOVENIAN HOTELS OUTSIDE THE PEAK SEASON

Milenko Gajić[1]

ABSTRACT: *The Slovenian hotel industry is strongly affected by seasonality, which depresses performance outside the peak summer months and complicates workforce planning. In addition to weaker financial outcomes, seasonality drives the outflow of high-quality staff who prefer stable, year-round jobs. This paper analyses the problem of uneven occupancy and reviews potential responses at two levels: (i) within hotels (e.g., service and product innovation, revenue management, and loyalty building) and (ii) at the destination and policy level (e.g., events and MICE development, dispersal strategies, and targeted marketing in the shoulder season). Drawing on national statistics and recent sector literature, the paper discusses how climate change, labour market conditions and sustainability reporting requirements interact with hotel operations. It also outlines practical levers—including partnerships with Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), the use of online travel agencies (OTAs) and user-generated content (UGC), and the integration of new demand drivers such as sports, cultural events and eSports—to smooth demand across the year. The findings suggest that a portfolio of coordinated measures, rather than a single intervention, is required to improve off-season occupancy and resilience in Slovenian hotels.*

KEYWORDS: *hospitality industry, hotel occupancy, destination management, seasonality, sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism destinations typically face two opposing pressures: overtourism during the high season and insufficient demand during the low season. While excessive visitation creates a range of environmental and social challenges, weak off-season demand renders hotel work organisation and staffing difficult, deters high-quality recruits who avoid seasonal jobs, and undermines profitability due to revenue volatility in the presence of high fixed costs. In the hotel sector—where fixed costs are substantial—sustained occupancy at appropriate price levels is therefore critical. Sector guidance in Slovenia indicates that hotels need to achieve around 60% annual occupancy to be profitable (Podjetnik.net, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach is adopted to examine how Slovenian hotels and destinations address the challenge of smoothing demand across the year. The paper synthesises sectoral data and recent academic and trade publications to illustrate approaches that can inform further discussion and solution-finding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The hospitality industry is under a pressure and is facing challenges in terms of sustainability, human resources, and competitiveness. Using indicators to measure companies' development is crucial to their success in a world as the hospitality industry (Gomes et al., 2025). Hotel occupancy rate is important for many reasons. It offers good insights into hotel's performance and demand. When combined with metrics like Average Daily Rate (ADR) and Revenue per Available Room (RevPAR), it shows a relevant basis in revenue management. Moreover, occupancy rate enables identifying customer demand, helps hotel to adjust operations accordingly. It also enhances revenue forecasting, permitting to plan more effectively for operational needs and predict future earnings based on expected demand. Occupancy rates fluctuate throughout the year, heavily influenced by hotel's location and seasonality. When we have occupancy rate under average, then we are going to bad economic

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situation.

In Slovenia, in 2024 we recorded 6,583,274 arrivals and 16,853,075 overnight stays. The average length of stay was 2.56 nights. The data within Slovenia are relative, as regions also differ from one another. The Gini coefficient of arrival intensity (for the entire country) is 0.3 (SURS, 2026). Of course, this is relative and depends on many different factors. What is merely a statistical figure for the national economy and a general piece of information for users can, however, represent a nightmare for hotel owners and managers. They would prefer the Gini index value to be 0, which would mean that visits are distributed evenly throughout the year. This would represent ideal conditions for organizing work and managing hotel operations.

The figure shows pronounced peaks from June to September and troughs between January and March, with shoulder months in between. Spa hotels and properties in Ljubljana tend to maintain higher year-round occupancy than those in Alpine and coastal regions.

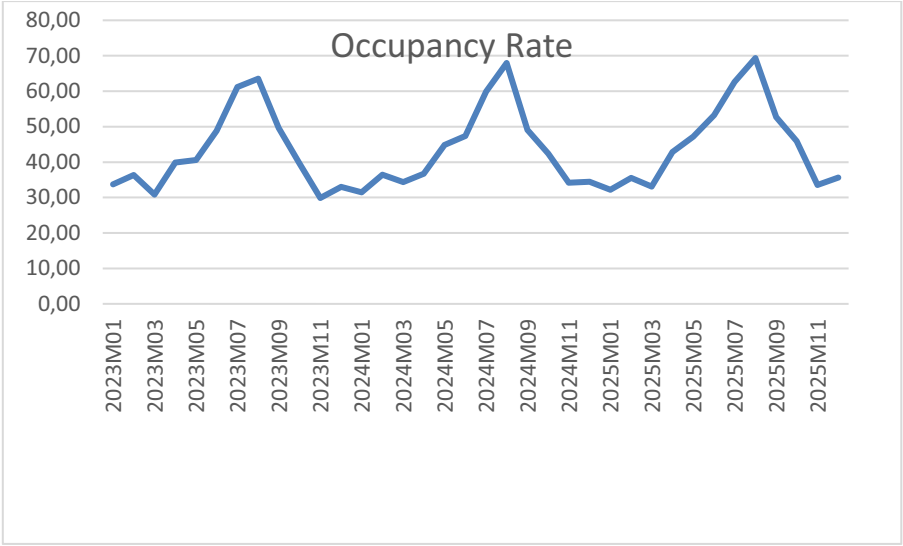

Figure 1. Net occupancy rate in hotels and similar accommodation: bed places in Slovenia—monthly 2023–2025 (%)

The chart clearly shows the deviation between the peak season and the bottom in winter months. Essentially, there are two stories: the peak from June to September, the lowest levels between January and March, and the remaining months somewhere in between. This is naturally not good for hotels and similar accommodations—motels, inns, boarding houses, and overnight accommodations. Despite its small size, Slovenia has different experiences: spa hotels and hotels in Ljubljana are the most occupied, while hotels in the Alps and on the Slovenian coast are less occupied year-round.

Research by the European Travel Commission shows that Europeans cite weather as one of the most important factors when choosing a holiday destination. As many as 76 percent of respondents have adjusted their travel habits due to climate change (Presekar, 2024). All of this affects hotel management. Hotels operate according to a different logic: they cannot sell their capacity beyond 100%, even when demand is significantly higher. At the same time, when occupancy is low, they face many difficulties—poor business results which, in a highly competitive environment, lead to reduced competitiveness. Consequently, a hotel company may become a target for stronger companies or may simply slip into bankruptcy, as happened to the company—the largest European hotel operator—Revo Hospitality Group, which declared insolvency and controlled bankruptcy on January 19, 2026. The ambitious expansion of the

Revo Hospitality Group in recent years caused duplication of structures and difficulties in integrating different business functions and departments. New acquisitions proved expensive, while the increase in occupancy was lower than forecast. In other words, hotel occupancy did not meet expectations. Lower occupancy led to reduced revenues and weaker cash flows, which negatively affected the company's liquidity, for example in repaying due loan instalments (Hospitality Inside, 2026).

Extending the tourist season, or deseasonalization, is one of the key tasks of Slovenian tourism, emphasizes the Slovenian Tourist Organization (Olaj, 2026). The key is to increase the number of arrivals and overnight stays during less busy parts of the year, especially in spring and autumn. The peak of the tourist season in Slovenia remains August, when the largest number of tourists stay overnight. Several factors contribute to this, among the most important being collective holidays and school vacations, which in most European countries are still scheduled during this period.

Table 1. Accommodation facilities in Slovenia — Net occupancy rate (NOR)

Year	NOR (%)
2017	47,1
2018	48,5
2019	44,0
2020	30,6
2021	34,7
2022	41,7
2023	41,7
2024	43,6

Due to climate change, such as less snowy winters, and due to more pleasant temperatures, holidays outside the summer season are becoming increasingly popular. During the low season, providers increasingly focus on specific groups, such as seniors, business guests, gastronomy enthusiasts, couples, or individuals without children. In addition to lower prices and additional activities, marketing activities targeting guests from distant markets, who traditionally visit Slovenia in spring and autumn, are also intensified. Many large events, such as international sports competitions and cultural events, are increasingly deliberately planned outside the main tourist season. These events create additional motivations to visit destinations and help extend the tourist season. People often think that low season is defined by weather. According to this belief, the low season occurs when the weather at the destination is at its worst (Presekar, 2024).

There is a story in Slovenia where, due to climate change, the international women's Alpine Skiing World Cup race "Golden Fox" (Zlata lisica)—established in 1964—was discontinued. In 2018, hotels that previously experienced peak demand in January suddenly became empty and unattractive, a situation that repeated in the following years. As a result, hotels experienced extremely poor business performance. Climate change has already changed—and will continue to change—seasonality and business models in many places. For example, mountain hotels, due to a lack of snow and temperatures too high for artificial snow production, must create different tourism products. This is not only a problem for hotels; it concerns entire tourist destinations. Therefore, hotel management must cooperate with Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and other stakeholders in the destination to address seasonality, ensure stable and balanced tourist arrivals, and generate sustainable benefits and prosperity. This even goes beyond individual destinations—it becomes a societal and national issue, where governments can contribute to deseasonalization and decentralization

through various interventions. In Slovenia, for example, the national DMO, the Slovenian Tourist Board, follows a strategic plan in which deseasonalization and decentralization—as well as the promotion of less-visited tourist locations and attractions—are clearly defined goals (Olaj, 2026). One of the measures is the division of winter school holidays: half of the country has one week in February, while the other half has the following week. Here it is important to emphasize the significant role of DMOs, which can contribute to increasing visits outside the peak season. For example, how can the UNESCO-protected Austrian village of Hallstatt, which has only 700 inhabitants but more than 10,000 visitors in peak season, distribute visits more evenly throughout the year (Bell, 2023).

Of course, there is no easy answer. The task of DMOs is to find solutions to avoid seasonality and create conditions for year-round visitation. In some areas, however, this is practically impossible—for example, on a Greek island where further construction is prohibited and tourism is exclusively related to sea bathing. There, hotels can hardly expect the season to be extended and occupancy improved.

However, Slovenia, despite being small, is highly accessible and therefore has different starting conditions and opportunities for deseasonalization. For example, some hotels in Croatian Istria have done this by building casinos, indoor heated pools, conference halls, and indoor sports facilities and gyms suitable for various sports and activities. At the same time, they improved and highlighted gastronomic offerings based on local suppliers and high-quality organic products such as olive oil, wine, cheeses, baked goods, meat products, jams, juices, and various alcoholic distillates. With improved and elevated gastronomy, they became attractive to so-called "foodies," who are less seasonally dependent. With sports facilities they became interesting for training camps, preparations, and competitions. Casinos, indoor pools, and spa centres attract a wide range of guests—from retirees to families with children of different ages. Various animation programs are also organized in hotels outside the main season.

Successful hotels manage to extend the season almost throughout the entire year, except perhaps for a week dedicated to major maintenance and cleaning and collective vacations for staff. At the same time, the cities in which these hotels are located must also offer activities outside the main season, since the hotel offer alone may not be a strong enough attraction. Therefore, destinations in cooperation with hotels organize various events—from New Year celebrations, nativity scenes, carnivals, Valentine's Day celebrations, competitions, concerts, dances, and parades. Such events enrich the life of the city and also improve the mood of local residents. It should also be noted that there is a growing number of digital nomads, for whom seasonality is not the primary reason for visiting a destination. There is also the possibility of creating theme parks to extend the tourist season.

Another social phenomenon is occurring: a certain segment of travellers deliberately chooses off-season travel to avoid crowds and high prices. Consequently, they are becoming new target segments for hotels. Destinations such as Sicily, Barcelona, or Rome are simply more manageable, more authentic, and more genuine outside the main season, while prices are significantly lower. Authenticity of experience is precisely the main advantage of visiting destinations outside the season. At that time, the destination lives its natural, everyday rhythm, the same rhythm as local residents—something that many tourists find particularly interesting. For other tourists, however, shorter days, worse weather, and fewer events remain significant barriers to visiting. It must also be emphasized that spreading visits throughout the year represents a sustainable choice for destinations. Not only does it reduce pressure on destinations, but it also improves the quality of experience for all stakeholders in tourism (Mirnik, 2026).

Guest satisfaction in hotels can be a factor (though not the only one) for improving hotel

occupancy. Except in some rare cases, complete customer satisfaction is key to ensuring loyalty—guests will return, often even during the low season. Satisfied guests spread positive news about their experience and stay in the hotel, either online or personally. Positive content increases trust and helps reduce perceived risk (Hao et al., 2025). A very popular and effective method is UGC (user-generated content), where guests themselves publish content about the hotel online—for example on TikTok. Such marketing promotion costs the hotel nothing while bringing benefits. There are also ratings on platforms such as TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Google.

Guest loyalty can only be built through positive differentiation and satisfaction, which is achieved through higher service quality. To create higher satisfaction levels, quality elements across all hotel departments are essential. Guest loyalty is also influenced by the concept of sustainability—an increasing number of guests value sustainable orientation in hotels. However, sustainability is still perceived by some as a form of sacrifice. Many people still struggle to connect the concepts of "hedonism" and "luxury" with sustainability. In reality, the first two concepts form the basis of consumer satisfaction (Gomes et al., 2025). At the same time, there is a segment of consumers demanding sustainably oriented services, although this segment is still relatively small globally and cannot significantly influence hotel occupancy rates. The challenge is therefore how to combine sustainability, comfort, luxury, and enjoyment into a meaningful whole. This is not merely a marketing task but rather a strategic decision by owners and hotel management (Gomes et al., 2025).

There is also a need for diversification of target markets—attracting guests from new markets who may have time to travel precisely during the low season. This requires cooperation from the wider community, which can influence the establishment of new airline connections. Hotels must offer lower prices during the off-season, but also richer packages, such as welcome sparkling wine in the room or spa access included in the price.

At the end of the 20th century, the United Kingdom faced a decline in hotel visits due to decreasing visits to cities—especially Hastings, Great Yarmouth, and Southport (Richardson et al., 2025). Due to modern transportation flows, tourists increasingly travelled to the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, leaving English seaside towns empty. The government introduced a regeneration initiative called "Sea Change" in 1999, aimed at revitalizing seaside resorts. Later policies and funding programs supported regeneration projects, infrastructure improvements, and the development of new tourism products (Richardson et al., 2025). In the hotel sector, research shows that value co-creation and innovation are two key pillars for improving organizational performance (Moise et al., 2026). Hotels rely heavily on strong partnerships with suppliers, including local food providers and experience partners. Together, they create the overall guest experience, which is central to modern hospitality. Sustainable innovations can quickly generate financial returns, allowing hotels to differentiate their offerings, increase guest satisfaction, and encourage repeat visits. Hotels can monetize innovation through higher prices, occupancy rates, and guest loyalty, which leads to stable revenues and word-of-mouth promotion (Moise et al., 2026).

It is important to note that not all hospitality companies focus exclusively on profit; some prioritize employee well-being and sustainability. Studies show that 93% of customers are likely to repurchase after excellent service, and 78% would continue supporting a company even after a mistake if customer service was excellent (Cain et al., 2025). However, the hospitality industry still faces low wages, irregular working hours, limited benefits, and sometimes unsafe working conditions, which reduce its attractiveness, particularly among young people (Božin, 2024). The seasonal and fluctuating demand in hospitality further worsens the problem, as many companies rely on temporary or part-time workers during peak

periods (Cain et al., 2025). At the end of 2025, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia raised the minimum wage to €1,000 net. This caused strong reactions among employers, who warned of economic collapse. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia warned that 16,000 companies could fail and 66,000 jobs could be threatened, which is significant in a country of about two million people (Lončar, 2026).

Globally, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 appears unrealistic. According to the UN SDG Report 2024, only 17% of measurable targets are on track, while about 48% have deviated from the planned trajectory (Tiamiyu, 2026). Tourism still contributes significantly to environmental problems such as wastewater, littering, wildlife disturbance, pollution, and overcrowding (Tiamiyu, 2026). A concept called "deliberate ignorance" describes situations where tourists intentionally ignore information about sustainable products or services (Tiamiyu, 2026). Despite awareness, stakeholders—including consumers, practitioners, and governments—may still justify unsustainable behaviour. Effective sustainability communication therefore requires ethical sensitivity, credible evidence, and cooperation with trusted local stakeholders. Hotel asset managers often act as bridges between owners and operators to align sustainability goals. One effective approach is modifying management contracts to include sustainability performance targets or shared-savings arrangements, ensuring both parties benefit from efficiency gains (Jackson, 2025). In the European Union, companies will also be required to submit sustainability reports under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), adopted in November 2022. Implementation occurs in phases, beginning with the largest companies, with smaller companies following later.

The growth of online travel agencies (OTAs) in the digital age, driven by economic development and technological progress, has revolutionized hotel room reservations (Hao et al., 2025). The introduction of OTAs has transformed the traditional "hotel–consumer" relationship into a more dynamic "hotel–OTA–consumer" interaction, which benefits small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by enabling them to access a broader customer base, including potential guests who may not have previously been familiar with the hotel's offer. This expanded reach has contributed to increased room sales and higher occupancy rates for independent hotels (Hao et al., 2025). Although OTAs compete with hotels in certain ways, they nevertheless play an important role in promoting hotel brands and attracting potential customers to hotels.

Event impact studies are used as a decision-support tool to understand the extent to which an event will affect a destination's image, the local economy, local residents, the environment, and other aspects. So far, sporting events have proven to stimulate visits from potential tourists interested in the host country, which can be particularly important for strengthening interest and trust after a crisis. Sporting events play a significant role in the marketing strategies of tourist destinations and attract considerable media attention (Borovcanin et al., 2020).

At the time of writing this paper, the Winter Olympic Games are taking place in Italy, where the opening ceremony alone has created a global spectacle that is expected to generate long-term positive financial effects for the country. Governments often use event impact studies to decide whether or not to host an event. Most impact studies focus primarily on economic and environmental impacts. Recently, however, there has been an increasing number of studies assessing local residents' perceptions of events, although some of them reach conflicting conclusions. This may be because residents' perceptions can change over time, which is why researchers sometimes avoid this type of study. Therefore, the decision to host a sporting event is complex, as it may generate both short-term and long-term effects on the destination and the

local community. Currently, the evaluation of the overall impact of events is shifting from a one-dimensional perspective to a three-dimensional paradigm (economic, social, and environmental) (Borovcanin et al., 2020).

Esports represent an incremental innovation that leads to new experiences and changing business paradigms in the modern hospitality industry. The term esports is used to describe competitive video gaming among professional players. Players usually belong to specific teams or sports organizations sponsored by various companies. Esports combine advanced gaming technologies with accommodation services, offering a unique entertainment addition to hotel rooms.

Guest rooms are the main product and primary source of revenue for hotels, providing guests with customized services during their stay. In-room entertainment is considered an important service that occupies guests during their discretionary time, alleviates boredom, and refreshes their minds with interactive and enjoyable activities. This not only creates memorable experiences, but also leaves positive impressions of the hotel brand (Babar & Yupei, 2025).

Hotels therefore pay close attention to improvements in in-room services to ensure guest comfort and memorable experiences. Digitalization and innovation have expanded in-room entertainment options, such as HD television channels, premium content, fitness suites, and now esports.

Esports content is engaging and cognitively executed in a computer-based environment, where players connect with each other around the world in a shared virtual space. This innovative form of entertainment has revolutionized online recreation and has become a rapidly growing phenomenon in the global entertainment industry. In 2023, the global esports market was valued at USD 1.72 billion, and it is expected to reach USD 1.9 billion by the end of 2025. The increasing popularity and growth of esports have encouraged its integration across various industries, including media, entertainment, tourism, and hospitality (Babar & Yupei, 2025). China is currently the largest esports market in the world, driven by government recognition, policy support, investments, and infrastructure.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents a review and analysis of the problem and highlights several aspects of potential solutions to an issue affecting a large part of the Slovenian tourism industry. The solution is not simple or one-dimensional but rather a combination of approaches—within hotel companies, at the local level through DMOs, and at the national level through tourism development strategies. It is essential to define a clear direction and vision and involve different stakeholders who must work together cohesively toward the deseasonalization of tourism.

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IMPLEMENTING ZERO WASTE IN HOSPITALITY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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ABSTRACT: *The hospitality industry exerts considerable pressure on natural resources due to intensive consumption of energy, water, and food, as well as the generation of significant amounts of waste. In response to growing environmental concerns, the adoption of sustainable practices such as zero waste management has become increasingly important within the hospitality sector. This study aims to examine the awareness, perceptions, and readiness of hospitality professionals in Novi Sad, Serbia, to implement zero waste practices and improve organic waste management. A cross-sectional quantitative survey was conducted among 25 managers and employees from restaurants, cafés, and hotels in Novi Sad. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. The questionnaire explored awareness of zero waste principles, perceived feasibility of implementation, and key barriers to adoption. The results indicate that 76% of respondents demonstrate at least a basic familiarity with zero waste principles. However, significant challenges remain. The main barriers identified are a lack of practical knowledge and insufficient infrastructure support (68% each), while financial costs were perceived as a less significant obstacle. Although respondents recognize the broader importance of sustainable practices (mean = 4.0), they perceive relatively low guest interest in sustainability initiatives (mean = 2.1). The findings highlight the importance of education, infrastructure development, and institutional support in facilitating the transition toward more sustainable hospitality practices. As a pilot study, this research provides preliminary insights and establishes a foundation for future large-scale investigations into zero waste implementation in the hospitality sector.*

KEYWORDS: *Zero waste, Circular gastronomy, Sustainable tourism, Organic waste management, Hospitality industry*

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry has a significant impact on the global environment, as it is characterized by high levels of energy consumption and extensive use of natural resources in its efforts to meet guests' needs (Khatter, 2023). The concept of sustainable tourism seeks to satisfy the needs of tourists in a manner that does not compromise the environment or negatively affect the local community (Peeters, Çakmak, & Guiver, 2024). Guests' stays in hotels and restaurants do not necessarily have a direct negative impact on the environment. However, the activities and services provided by this industry often leave a significant ecological footprint (Ramkissoon, 2023). Tourism and hospitality are frequently ranked among the economic sectors that place the greatest pressure on natural resources, as they involve intensive consumption of water, energy, and forest resources, while simultaneously generating large amounts of waste and air pollution (Stefănică, Sandu, Butnaru, & Haller, 2021).

Sustainability is a development model that promotes the efficient use, reuse, and recycling of resources to reduce waste and protect the environment while balancing economic, social, and ecological needs. In the hospitality and tourism sector, environmentally responsible practices such as energy efficiency, water conservation and waste reduction contribute not only to environmental protection but also to business competitiveness (Bhatt, 2024).

Food waste management at the end of its life cycle, together with the implementation of sustainable production and consumption practices, represents a key pillar of the modern food and hospitality industry (Chatziparaskeva et al., 2022). These activities aim to reduce the

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negative environmental impact through the efficient use of resources, recycling, and reuse of materials, promoting the principles of a circular economy and creating conditions for long-term ecological sustainability (van Ginneken, Melissen, & Wood, 2016).

Modern tourists increasingly choose destinations that promote "green" values, making the zero waste concept not only an ecological approach but also a marketing and tourism trend (Peeters, Çakmak, & Guiver, 2024). In this context, gastronomy is no longer merely a service activity. It has become a key element of a sustainable tourism offering, where food is interpreted through the triad: nutrition, gastronomy and sustainability (Singh, 2024).

This shift in consumer behavior directly influences the decisions of hotels and restaurants. The zero waste approach is no longer just an ecological initiative. It has become a marketing trend that increases the attractiveness of a destination and builds an image of responsibility and innovation (Bhatt, 2024).

Decision-making in tourism and hospitality is a key management process, as it determines business efficiency and success. Managers and employees make decisions that directly affect service quality and guest satisfaction. Decisions are based on identifying current problems, defining desired outcomes, and selecting actions to achieve change. These decisions can be both rational and logical, as well as intuitive and creative (Vukosav & Đeri, 2021).

The process of decision-making typically involves several stages: problem identification, information gathering and analysis, generation of possible solutions, evaluation of alternatives, selection, and implementation (Čerović, 2009).

Based on this theoretical background, the study aims to identify key challenges related to organic waste management in the hospitality sector and explore potential solutions for improving sustainable practices in Novi Sad.

The aim of this study is to examine the awareness, perceptions, and readiness of hospitality professionals in Novi Sad to implement zero waste practices and improve organic waste management within hospitality operations.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in October 2025 using a convenience sampling approach. Participants were recruited from 25 hospitality establishments, including restaurants, cafés and hotels located in Novi Sad and its surrounding areas. The establishments were distributed across three geographic zones: urban (72%, n = 18), suburban (12%, n = 3) and rural (16%, n = 4). This distribution reflects the structure of the hospitality sector in Novi Sad, while also acknowledging the limitations of non-probability sampling typical for pilot studies. Participants included managers and frontline staff directly involved in kitchen operations or waste management, all of whom participated voluntarily. The sample size (N = 25) represents a pilot phase with a limited number of participants, aimed at testing the research instrument and identifying key barriers, serving as a foundation for a subsequent larger-scale study.

The research was conducted through a structured questionnaire encompassing six thematic domains: (1) awareness of zero waste, (2) perceived feasibility of implementation, (3) anticipated guest reactions, (4) current organic waste management practices, (5) identified barriers to adoption, and (6) attitudes toward sustainability as a competitive advantage. The questionnaire was developed based on previous studies on sustainability and waste management in the hospitality sector and adapted to the local research context. Respondents expressed their views using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree or not feasible to 5 = strongly agree or completely feasible), enabling quantification of opinions and measurement of agreement intensity with predefined statements.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, frequencies, percentages,

and arithmetic means, computed via Microsoft Excel. Likert scale responses were interpreted using standard benchmarks: 1.0–2.0 (low agreement), 2.1–3.0 (moderate), 3.1–4.0 (high), and 4.1–5.0 (very high). No inferential statistics were applied due to the pilot nature and limited sample size.

The analysis focused on:

(1) familiarity with the zero waste concept,

(2) current practices in organic waste management,

(3) identified barriers to implementation,

(4) attitudes and willingness to adopt sustainable solutions

Participation in the survey was voluntary and respondents were informed that their answers would be used exclusively for research purposes.

RESULTS

To understand staff awareness, participants indicated their level of familiarity with zero waste practices in hospitality. The results show that 36% of respondents consider themselves familiar, 40% somewhat familiar, and 24% not familiar at all. Overall, approximately three quarters of respondents (76%) demonstrated at least a basic understanding of zero waste, indicating some foundational awareness. However, the nearly one-quarter who reported no familiarity highlights the need for more structured education, standardized procedures, and better integration of zero waste practices across establishments.

Participants were also asked to assess how feasible it would be to implement a zero waste system in their own workplace, using a scale from 1 (not at all feasible) to 5 (completely feasible). Their responses provide insight into the practical factors influencing adoption, such as financial resources, staff engagement, and technical infrastructure. These findings help frame both the opportunities and the challenges of translating zero waste principles into everyday hospitality operations. The distribution of responses is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Perceived Reality of Implementing a Zero Waste System

Rating Scale	Description	Number of Respondents	%
1	Completely unfeasible	1	4
2	Difficult to implement	6	24
3	Partially feasible	8	32
4	Realistically feasible	7	28
5	Completely feasible	3	12
	Total	25	100

The average rating is (M = 3.2), indicating moderate optimism: most managers and employees believe that implementation is feasible, provided certain conditions are met, primarily financial support, adequate infrastructure, and employee training.

Most respondents (72%) believe that guests' reactions would be moderate or neutral, while 28% expect a positive response. These findings suggest that consumer awareness of the importance of sustainable practices is still developing, highlighting the need for informational campaigns and promotional activities to emphasize the environmental and social benefits of such measures. According to most respondents (64%), the introduction of a zero waste system would not significantly change the number of visitors, while 32% expect a slight increase in interest, indicating the potential for such practices to be used as a marketing element in promoting establishments. One respondent (4%) believes the effect could be negative, which

may be associated with concerns about price increases or changes in the offerings.

Overall, the results indicate that managers and employees are more willing to adopt changes than the market is currently prepared to recognize them as valuable, further emphasizing the need for consumer education and the branding of hospitality establishments through sustainable practices. The research results show that the main barriers to implementing zero waste principles in hospitality establishments are not financial costs, but rather a lack of practical knowledge (68%) and insufficient infrastructure support (68%). The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Barriers to Implementation in Hospitality Establishments

Barrier	Number of Respondents (out of 25)	Share (%)
Lack of education and knowledge	17	68
Lack of infrastructure	17	68
Staff resistance	9	36
Lack of support from local institutions	8	32
Financial costs	5	20
Other	1	4

The surveyed hospitality professionals rated their level of agreement with a series of statements on the importance and practical applicability of the zero waste approach using a Likert scale (1–5). The results show that employees largely recognize the strategic and economic significance of responsible waste management. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Respondents' Level of Agreement with Selected Statements

Statement	Average
Zero waste is important for the future of society	4.0
Guests are interested in sustainability	2.1
Implementing sustainable practices is a competitive advantage	3.4
Employees would be willing to undergo training	3.8
Investing in zero waste is long-term profitable	3.7

These results indicate a relatively high level of awareness and motivation among hospitality professionals regarding sustainable practices. However, the key dissonance appears in market perception: the average rating of 2.1 on the Likert scale shows that hospitality providers do not expect direct support from tourists (e.g., more guests or a greater willingness to pay). This means that zero waste is not perceived as a marketing trigger, but as an internal quality standard, which has important implications for the development of Novi Sad's tourism brand. If hospitality providers do not believe that tourists will reward their efforts, there is little likelihood that initiatives will progress spontaneously without institutional support.

The proposed solutions for implementing zero waste practices in the hospitality sector can be grouped into several key categories:

1. Spatial planning and institutional support
2. Operational measures for food waste reduction in hospitality
3. Reconnecting restaurants with local agricultural systems
4. Market value of zero waste practices in hospitality and tourism

Spatial planning plays a key role in integrating agriculture, hospitality, and tourism. In

line with the Sustainable Development Goals (UNDP, 2021), cities like Novi Sad should develop models that connect local production, gastronomy, and the tourism offer into a functional system (APRUS, 2023). Although this synergy already exists in some forms (farmsteads, rural gastronomy), its scope is limited by the lack of infrastructure, logistics, and systemic support (Tešin, Đorđević, & Dragin, 2025). Support from public institutions is a prerequisite for the implementation of circular models. Without clear strategies, stable funding, and coordination of actors, local initiatives remain isolated and short-lived. (Banjac, 2022).

According to Cochran et al. (2018) , one solution to reduce food waste in the hospitality industry is smart menu design, which involves strategically minimizing the number of ingredients and maximizing their cross-utilization across multiple dishes. By repurposing food prep trim and overproduction into new specials or beverages, restaurants can significantly cut waste while boosting profitability with minimal investment. Success relies on training staff in portion optimization, batch cooking, and systematic production planning.

The zero waste restaurant concept provides an operational framework for reducing food waste by reconnecting restaurants with local agricultural systems. Organic kitchen by-products can be returned to the agricultural cycle through in-house composting, creating a closed resource loop between agriculture and hospitality (Nguyen, 2019). Bhatt (2024) confirms the strategic market value of these practices, highlighting their capacity to enhance brand perception and attract sustainability-oriented consumers willing to pay a premium. Consequently, zero waste initiatives transcend mere environmental compliance, positioning themselves as drivers of sustainable innovation and competitive advantage within the sector.

DISCUSSION

This pilot study provides insight into the readiness of hospitality professionals in Novi Sad to adopt zero waste practices, revealing both opportunities and limitations. While the majority of managers and frontline staff demonstrate at least a basic awareness of sustainable waste management, a significant proportion remain unfamiliar with its principles, indicating the need for structured training and systematic integration of these practices within operations. This knowledge gap suggests that successful implementation depends less on financial investment and more on capacity building and technical support.

Participants expressed cautious optimism regarding the feasibility of introducing zero waste systems, emphasizing the importance of adequate infrastructure, employee training, and institutional backing. Interestingly, while staff motivation is relatively high, expectations of guest recognition or market-driven incentives remain low. This misalignment underscores a critical challenge: without consumer awareness or appreciation of sustainable initiatives, internal efforts may not translate into tangible benefits for businesses, such as increased visitation or willingness to pay.

These findings reflect broader trends in sustainable tourism, where circular economy approaches and environmentally responsible gastronomy are becoming essential components of long-term competitiveness. Hospitality providers are increasingly expected to integrate operational efficiency, waste reduction, and sustainability into their service offerings, not only as an ecological imperative but also as a strategic differentiator.

Spatial planning and coordinated local policies emerge as vital mechanisms to support this transition. By linking agriculture, local gastronomy, and tourism in a structured framework, cities like Novi Sad can facilitate the adoption of circular models while addressing infrastructure and logistical constraints. Such systemic support is necessary to ensure that individual initiatives are sustainable and scalable, bridging the gap between internal motivation and external recognition.

One limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size and the use of convenience sampling, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. However, as a pilot study, the research provides valuable preliminary insights that can support the design of future large-scale investigations.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this pilot study offer preliminary insights into the current state of zero waste practices in Novi Sad's hospitality sector. Although there is a growing awareness of sustainable waste management among managers and staff, knowledge gaps and insufficient infrastructure continue to limit full implementation.

Feasibility is influenced more by employee engagement, operational capacity, and institutional support than by financial resources alone. Moreover, a disconnect between staff motivation and the expected level of guest recognition highlights the need for greater consumer awareness and targeted marketing strategies that emphasize the value of sustainable practices.

Overall, advancing zero waste practices in hospitality requires coordinated efforts in staff training, operational management, local agricultural integration and policy support. These findings provide a useful starting point for future research and may support the development of practical strategies for promoting circular and sustainable hospitality systems.

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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE ORGANIZATION OF WORLD SPORTING EVENTS IN HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT: *The Hungarian domestic tourism sector has experienced significant technological transformation in recent years, creating new opportunities and complex challenges for destination managers, event organizers, and local tourism stakeholders. This study explores emerging trends that are reshaping the planning, promotion, and experience of tourism-related events within Hungary, with particular emphasis on artificial intelligence (AI). AI enables personalized program recommendations for domestic travelers, chatbot-based visitor assistance, and predictive analytics supporting demand forecasting and capacity planning in regional destinations.Hybrid and digitally supported event formats have become increasingly common in Hungary, allowing smaller towns and rural destinations to extend their reach beyond physical attendance. Interactive digital platforms, gamified visitor experiences, and virtual access to cultural and gastronomic events contribute to stronger engagement among domestic audiences.Immersive technologies such as augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR) enhance destination marketing and visitor engagement through virtual heritage site tours, interactive museum exhibitions, and pre-event promotional experiences. Smart devices, wearable technologies, and Internet of Things (IoT) applications support crowd management, access control, real-time visitor analytics, and contactless payment systems at festivals and national events.Digital marketing strategies play a central role in domestic tourism visibility. Influencer collaborations, short-form video content (e.g., TikTok and Instagram Reels), and AI-generated promotional materials significantly increase the reach of regional events and seasonal campaigns. These tools are particularly effective in targeting younger domestic traveler segments.Sustainability has also become a strategic priority in Hungarian tourism development. Digital ticketing systems, energy-efficient event infrastructure, waste-reduction initiatives, and carbon-conscious transportation planning contribute to more responsible destination management. Technology therefore functions not only as an operational tool but also as a driver of sustainable and resilient domestic tourism growth.Drawing on Hungary's recent experience in hosting large-scale national and international events, this study also examines how fan engagement technologies—such as interactive audience cameras, AI-powered personalization tools, and digital storytelling formats—can strengthen local tourism impact by encouraging repeat visitation and enhancing place attachment among domestic travelers.The findings highlight the strategic role of technology in strengthening Hungary's domestic tourism competitiveness, enriching visitor experiences, and supporting innovative, future-oriented destination development.*

KEYWORDS: *Sport, Event Management, Innovations in Hungary,*
JEL Classification: *JEL83*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism event management within Hungarian domestic tourism represents a strategically significant and dynamically evolving domain aligned with the objectives of **Hungary's National Tourism Development Strategy 2030 (NTDS 2030).** The NTDS 2030 identifies experience-based tourism development, digital transformation, sustainability, and regional value creation as core pillars of Hungary's long-term tourism competitiveness. Within this framework, tourism-related events function not merely as individual attractions but as complex destination development instruments that stimulate domestic mobility, strengthen regional identity, and generate measurable economic impact. Drawing on professional practice and recent sectoral developments, it can be asserted that no two tourism events are identical; each destination, thematic focus, and visitor segment requires tailored planning and adaptive management solutions. This variability fosters continuous innovation and knowledge

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development among destination management organizations (DMOs), municipalities, and tourism service providers operating within Hungary's domestic market.

Over the past decade, Hungarian domestic tourism has undergone substantial digital transformation in line with the strategic priorities outlined in the NTDS 2030. The Strategy emphasizes smart solutions, data-driven governance, and innovation-oriented development as key enablers of competitiveness. Emerging technologies—such as artificial intelligence (AI), augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), Internet of Things (IoT) applications, and secure digital transaction systems—have become increasingly integrated into tourism practice. These technologies enhance personalized visitor experiences, support real-time capacity monitoring at events, enable predictive demand forecasting, and improve operational efficiency across destinations. In accordance with the NTDS 2030's focus on high value-added tourism products, technological innovation strengthens experiential tourism offerings, including cultural festivals, gastronomic events, heritage programs, health tourism initiatives, and nationally significant sporting events. AI-driven recommendation systems, immersive digital storytelling, and interactive engagement tools contribute to extending visitor stay, increasing average expenditure, and fostering repeat domestic travel within Hungary.

Furthermore, the NTDS 2030 identifies sustainability as a cross-cutting strategic priority. Digital ticketing systems, energy-efficient infrastructure, smart mobility solutions, and data-based visitor flow management support responsible destination governance and environmentally conscious event organization. Technology therefore functions not only as an operational instrument but also as a strategic enabler of sustainable, resilient, and regionally balanced tourism development. Increasing competition among Hungarian destinations, combined with shifting media consumption patterns—particularly among younger domestic traveler segments—necessitates adaptive, interactive, and data-driven communication strategies. The widespread use of short-form digital content and influencer-based marketing requires tourism stakeholders to rethink traditional engagement models. Consequently, technology has emerged as a central pillar in achieving the strategic objectives of competitiveness, innovation, and long-term value creation within Hungary's domestic tourism ecosystem as envisioned by the NTDS 2030

To examine these dynamics, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do AI-powered fan engagement tools influence audience interaction, emotional involvement, and overall satisfaction at international sporting events?
2. What are the operational and strategic benefits of implementing technologies such as IoT, AR/VR, and blockchain in event management?
3. In what ways do these technologies contribute to the long-term innovation, competitiveness, and sustainability of event planning practices?

The methodological approach chosen for this research is qualitative, centered on in-depth expert interviews. This method was selected due to its ability to capture nuanced, experience-based insights that go beyond surface-level observation. Interviews were conducted with professionals directly involved in the planning, development, and execution of fan engagement initiatives at three major international sports events hosted in Hungary: the 2022 FINA World Championships, the 2023 World Athletics Championships, and the 2024 Swimming Championships (25m). These events serve as rich case studies due to their scale, global visibility, and the variety of technological tools implemented—from AI-powered look-alike cams and personalized athlete intro cards to interactive audience activations.

The structure of the paper is as follows: the next section presents a comprehensive literature review that outlines key trends and theoretical frameworks related to technology in event management. This is followed by a detailed methodology section explaining the research

design and interview process. The findings section then summarizes key insights from the interviews, illustrating how specific technologies impacted both audience experience and operational performance. The discussion section interprets these results in light of the research questions, highlighting implications for future practice. Finally, the conclusion offers a synthesis of the findings and recommendations for further research and technological innovation in the event sector. Through this investigation, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how technology is not only enhancing events operationally but also serving as a catalyst for engagement, innovation, and sustainable growth in the field of event management.

2. NEW TRENDS IN THE EVENT MANAGEMENT MARKET

The sports event management industry has experienced rapid transformation due to the integration of advanced digital technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), the Internet of Things (IoT), blockchain, and sustainability-focused innovations. These technologies improve operational efficiency, enhance fan engagement, and support stakeholder satisfaction, particularly in large-scale international sports events where audience expectations are increasingly digital and interactive

2.1. **Artificial Intelligence and Chatbots**

AI technologies facilitate dynamic personalization and predictive analytics within event contexts. Machine learning models analyze attendee behavior, enabling customized program recommendations and intelligent matchmaking, which ultimately enhance satisfaction and networking outcomes (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Wang et al., 2022). The Web Summit in Lisbon exemplifies this trend by utilizing AI-driven matchmaking to connect participants with shared interests (Web Summit, 2024). Additionally, chatbots serve as virtual assistants, providing instant responses regarding schedules, venue information, and ticketing, which significantly improves customer service (Gretzel et al., 2015). These AI systems also leverage big data from previous events to predict attendance and optimize resource allocation. *"AI systems can also continuously 'learn from experience' and therefore the route taken to the outcome might be different each time the AI system is run."* (WTTC, 2024, pp9).

Functions in sports events:

- Personalized match and session recommendations
- Interactive Q&A and fan engagement support
- Real-time notifications for schedule updates

2.2. **Hybrid and Virtual Events**

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of hybrid event formats, combining in-person and virtual participation. This shift has been widely studied, showing increased accessibility and engagement, but also challenges in maintaining immersive experiences and community building (Getz & Page, 2020; Neuhofer et al., 2015). Apple Keynote and Microsoft Ignite demonstrate best practices in delivering high-quality streams with interactive features such as live polls and Q&A, which enhance attendee involvement (Apple, n.d.; Microsoft Ignite, n.d.). Virtual festivals like Tomorrowland's Around the World leveraged 3D virtual spaces and multiple camera angles to mimic physical event dynamics (Filo et al., 2015) Virtual components of events such as FIFA Fan Fest and the NBA 2K League demonstrate how hybrid formats increase accessibility while challenging organizers to maintain immersive experiences and community building (Apple, n.d.; Microsoft Ignite, n.d.).

Functions in sports events:

- Remote participation for international audiences
- Interactive elements such as live polls, quizzes, and Q&A

- Virtual community building and engagement

2.3. **Augmented and Virtual Reality (AR/VR)**

Immersive technologies such as AR and VR enrich event experiences by facilitating novel ways to explore venues and products (Neuhofer, et al, 2015). AR applications at Coachella allowed attendees to experience performance visuals through mobile devices, fostering greater engagement (Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán, 2012). Similarly, the Mobile World Congress showcased VR demonstrations of emerging 5G tech, while New York Fashion Week offered fully virtual runway shows accessible remotely (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). Research suggests that immersive technologies increase emotional engagement and recall in event settings (Hilken et al., 2017).VR solutions have been used for virtual stadium tours and live match simulations, enhancing emotional engagement and recall (Hilken et al., 2017). Examples include AR visualizations at UEFA Champions League matches and fully virtual fan experiences at swimming championships.

Functions in sports events:

- Virtual stadium exploration and match visualization
- Real-time data overlays and immersive fan experiences
- Interactive sponsor content and marketing activation

2.4**. Smart Contracts and Vendor Management**

Smart contracts serve as automated tools that streamline the logistics of events by enforcing specific terms, including deadlines and payment schedules, based on conditions that have been previously agreed upon. This automation plays a crucial role in minimizing administrative inefficiencies and reducing the likelihood of disputes among stakeholders (Chen et al., 2021). By leveraging this technology, event supply chains are poised for a significant transformation, enabling more agile and transparent relationships between vendors and organizers, ultimately enhancing the overall efficiency of the event planning process (Chen et al., 2021).

2.5. **IoT and Smart Devices**

IoT solutions like RFID-enabled badges and NFC smart wristbands are critical for streamlining event operations, enabling real-time crowd analytics, and improving security (Gretzel et al., 2015). Disney's MagicBand+ wristbands provide a seamless contactless experience integrating entry, payments, and ride interactions, exemplifying IoT's role in enhancing visitor journeys (Buhalis & Leung, 2018). Studies indicate that IoT-enabled environments allow data-driven event planning, including heatmaps and flow optimization, improving safety and satisfaction (Leung et al., 2013). CES utilizes RFID for real-time visitor tracking, enabling organizers to adapt spatial layouts dynamically (Wang et al., 2022). Real-time crowd tracking enables organizers to optimize stadium layouts, improve safety, and enhance the overall experience (Leung et al., 2013).

Functions in sports events:

- Contactless entry and cashless payments
- Real-time crowd flow and safety monitoring
- Personalized fan engagement and experiences

2.6. **Blockchain and NFT Ticketing**

Blockchain technology provides a tamper-proof solution for ticketing, significantly reducing fraud and resale abuses. Additionally, NFTs create new opportunities for innovative digital assets and exclusive VIP access (Regner et al., 2019; Ulrich et al., 2021). YellowHeart's groundbreaking blockchain ticket sales for Kings of Leon concerts were a pioneering effort in integrating NFTs with the delivery of exclusive content, thereby enhancing fan engagement (Müller et al., 2023). Coachella's 2022 NFT ticket pilot further demonstrates the potential of

blockchain to create unique digital memorabilia while ensuring secure event entry (Coachella, 2022). Scholarly research underscores the capacity of blockchain to decentralize event management, thereby enhancing transparency and fostering trust among stakeholders (Atzori, 2017). Early implementations in music events have inspired sports organizations to integrate NFTs for memorabilia, premium access, and interactive fan content, increasing loyalty and engagement (Müller et al., 2023).

Functions in sports events:

- Secure, transparent ticketing systems
- Exclusive digital content and collectibles
- Enhanced fan trust and decentralized management

2.7. **Social Media and Digital Marketing**

The use of short-form videos (TikTok, Instagram Reels), influencer partnerships, and user-generated content (UGC) increasingly drives event promotion and engagement (Zeng et al., 2021). VidCon's TikTok Live sessions and the NFL's AR-enhanced Super Bowl campaigns demonstrate effective digital engagement strategies (Li et al., 2020). Research underlines the efficacy of AI-powered content generation in enhancing marketing reach and personalization (Wang et al., 2022).

Functions in sports events:

- Interactive fan engagement through social media
- Personalized marketing and promotion
- Live streaming and behind-the-scenes access

2.8. **Sustainable Tech solutions**

Sustainability has emerged as a vital component of event management, with an increasing emphasis on digital tickets, renewable energy utilization, and waste reduction strategies (Mair & Jago, 2010). The Glastonbury Festival stands out with its initiative to eliminate single-use plastics and implement solar-powered stages, serving as a model for environmentally conscious event practices (Glastonbury, n.d.). Coldplay's "Music of the Spheres" tour showcases innovation through kinetic energy-harvesting dance floors, demonstrating how technology can engage audiences while minimizing environmental impact (Energy Floors, n.d.). Additionally, the carbon-neutral certification of the Google I/O Developer Conference illustrates the practicality of incorporating sustainability into large-scale tech events (South Pole, 2023). Stadiums and events increasingly adopt energy-efficient technologies, carbon-neutral certifications, and initiatives to minimize single-use plastics, catering to environmentally conscious fans (South Pole, 2023).

Functions in sports events:

- Reduced environmental footprint via sustainable technology
- Energy-efficient stadium operations
- Eco-friendly fan engagement experiences

Emerging technologies converge to create fan-centric, efficient, and sustainable sports event ecosystems. Challenges remain, including data privacy concerns, energy demands, and unequal access to digital platforms. Future research should focus on responsible technology adoption, interoperability standards, and long-term impacts on fan experience and sports event economics (Getz & Page, 2020; Müller et al., 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

3.1. **Methodology**

The topic of our research necessitated the application of two complementary methods to provide a comprehensive overview: both primary and secondary research were conducted.

As secondary research, we primarily analyzed relevant literature related to digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), smart devices, social media, sustainability, and online and hybrid events. These topics are essential for the scope of our study, and thus both earlier and recent publications were reviewed. Given that this is a constantly evolving field, up-to-date knowledge is indispensable; therefore, we supplemented the literature review with insights obtained from interviews.

For the primary research, we conducted interviews with professionals working in event management whose expertise is relevant to the subject. Each interviewee has significant experience in organizing major events and works in different areas of the industry, which is reflected in the variety of perspectives—particularly regarding the importance and role of AI in event planning, organization, and execution. In total, we interviewed four experts who have recently and frequently engaged with AI, applying it in various phases of events, although the perceived usefulness and importance of AI differ depending on their professional domains. For instance, its perceived value varies between those who use AI in designing entertainment programs and those responsible for delivering these experiences to audiences. This divergence in viewpoints was the most notable; in other respects, there was broad consensus.

The interviews were conducted between June and July 2025, lasting between thirty minutes and one hour each. We chose interviews as our research method because they allow for an in-depth understanding of expert perspectives within the specific professional domain—in this case, the use of digitalization and AI in events. The process yielded positive experiences, with all interviewees being cooperative and forthcoming. We consider the number of interviews conducted to be sufficient for the current stage of research. All interviews followed a preliminary interview guide, ensuring comparability, while also allowing flexibility to reflect the specific expertise and experiences of each participant. In total, we asked our interviewees 11 open-ended questions covering topics such as the trends characterizing event management, our level of competitiveness, the use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in event management, possibilities for audience entertainment, similarities and differences among the examined three events, and future trends in the use of technologies.

3.2. **Results**

The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2025 with individuals experienced in organizing sports events. We have had the opportunity to collaborate with them on multiple occasions, including at the events under study (FINA 2022 World Championships, 2023 World Athletics Championships, and 2024 Swimming Championships (25m), enabling us to assess their professional expertise first-hand. The interviewed professionals were:

Gábor Varga, Presentation Manager, Sport Events
Gábor Korpás, Program Editor, Sport Events
Zoltán Mag, Television Director, Chief Director at sports events
Lajos Varga-Nagy, TV Technical Manager, Director at sports events

The interviewees' diverse professional backgrounds are reflected in the variation of opinions in certain areas of the findings. Overall, however, responses to most questions were aligned. While four interviews are insufficient for establishing definitive categories, there was a clear pattern: the two professionals responsible for sport presentation and program content shared largely similar views, as did the two TV directors, albeit from a different perspective.

All interviewees indicated 2017 as the year from which they began working on sporting events organized primarily by Sport Events. Prior to that, each had accumulated experience in various areas of event management, and all had worked for television channels in roles aligned with their professional expertise, thus possessing substantial broadcasting experience. This is a significant detail, as it means all participants have a clear understanding of what spectators and

fans seek, and how their attention can be captured and maintained for both shorter and extended periods.

Following the first interview, it became evident that questions relating to digital technology were no longer particularly relevant, as it is virtually impossible to plan or execute an event without it (although, in our framework, these were still addressed alongside questions concerning artificial intelligence). In contrast, questions about AI were both timely and, in certain respects, divisive, as noted earlier.

Competitiveness

Respondents agreed that Hungary is competitive in organizing large-scale international sporting events, with budget being the most decisive factor, as many aspects depend on it. Naturally, there is a significant difference between an event held weekly and one staged every four years. In terms of audience entertainment, however, one interviewee noted that Hungary lags behind, as there is often a lack of conceptual input from clients, making it difficult to finance impactful program elements within a given budget. All participants concurred that engaging the audience is essential, as these moments create lasting memories and experiences—both before and after the competition itself—and thus play a crucial role in the overall event experience.

The role of digitalization in event management

As previously noted, digital technology is employed at every stage of event organization and is therefore considered a fundamental element. In contrast, artificial intelligence is approached with a degree of caution, as it is less familiar and still being learned; nevertheless, it is already being used in planning, lighting design, educational initiatives, and idea generation, as well as experimentally in graphic design. While the ease of implementation remains a question, AI has the potential to open new avenues in event management. Larger events, supported by more substantial technical resources, can more readily incorporate both digital and AI solutions, whereas smaller events typically do not employ them.

For spectators, it is essential to receive memorable experiences from entry to departure, and AI can contribute to this through various entertainment activities—though such applications are budget-dependent. The first such implementation occurred at the 2024 Swimming Championships (25m). However, there have also been instances (outside the scope of the events studied) where ChatGPT was used to prepare quiz questions, but the system was unaware of recent rule changes, making it necessary to treat its proposed questions and answers with caution.

An important consideration is the extent to which professional organizations are open to adopting these technologies and regard them as significant for a given event. The interviews revealed that while some organizations are not receptive to sport presentation, others—such as the Handball Federation, Volleyball, Fencing, and Water Polo Federations—are open to it and even have dedicated staff responsible for such initiatives.

As previously noted, events cannot function without digital technology. Artificial intelligence introduces new possibilities, facilitating and accelerating organizational processes. For instance, it can be effectively used to draft running orders, contracts, and quizzes, or to quickly retrieve "consumable" information—although the generated content must be verified (as illustrated by an earlier example). AI represents an opportunity worth exploiting, as it can be intelligently integrated into the planning process or incorporated into entertainment elements. One respondent highlighted its usefulness for image manipulation, although this requires substantial programming expertise.

The ease of use and time requirements for implementing these technologies in event organization elicited somewhat differing responses, depending on the specific domain in which

they are applied. Considering digitalization alone, respondents unanimously agreed that it is easy to use and reduces the time required for planning and organization, as previously mentioned. However, when focusing specifically on artificial intelligence, issues such as legal concerns, copyright, and the novelty of the technology itself often extend the required time, as its full scope of applications is not yet entirely clear. In addition, prompts must often be refined repeatedly for AI systems such as ChatGPT to generate satisfactory answers. Over time, as AI proficiency increases, searching for results and implementing solutions will become easier and faster.

The conceptualization and execution of an entertainment element often take longer, which does not always fit within an event's time constraints. Consequently, AI-based entertainment is sometimes abandoned in favor of simpler games, particularly given the high costs associated with AI-driven activities. During preparations, an effective solution may be to employ an MC (master of ceremonies) capable of filling time in the event of a technical issue with AI implementation.

Audience entertainment

AI-powered entertainment—such as a face swap game, in which the face of a selected spectator is transformed into that of a famous individual—must be tested multiple times before being used in a live setting, as several potential sources of error may occur.

Spectators tend to enjoy games, a preference often influenced by the openness of the audience and their degree of engagement with the activities. Without such engagement, even elaborately designed games, which often require substantial financial investment, fail to resonate due to a lack of audience receptivity. Frequently, a minimalist approach proves more effective; for instance, activating the audience through collective shouting or coordinated wave motions can generate a stronger impact and enhance the overall experience more than more complex interactive tasks—such as requiring participants to play a game on their phones, imitate Hungarian words as foreigners, dance cam, catch virtual birds, become celebrity look-alikes using AI-assisted face-swapping technology, or mimic emojis. Consequently, continuous gameplay integration is not always feasible due to budgetary constraints or limited broadcast time.

The use of these digital technologies and innovations is also of interest from the athletes' perspective. Based on our analysis of international sporting events, it is observable that, especially during the initial days, some athletes experience discomfort (although not all) when required to enter the field through unconventional means—such as an introductory gate showcasing competitors or passing through a revolving gate. For this reason, organizers often provide athletes with rehearsal opportunities to ensure they can enter the competition venue in a manner that preserves their comfort and concentration. Coaches frequently shield their athletes from these elements to maintain optimal focus.

From a broadcasting standpoint, however, it is essential to consider the visual presentation of athletes during live coverage, prompting the incorporation of deliberate show elements in how competitors approach the starting line. Thus, the reception of these performative aspects is highly individualized; some athletes may mentally disengage due to concentration demands, effectively being absent from the show element as they focus on their event. Modern awareness underscores the necessity of enhancing the appeal and engagement of competitions and their broadcasts for spectators and fans alike.

An alternative perspective regarding digital technology pertains to its widespread use in statistical data collection and performance measurement by athletes and their support teams. This demonstrates that digitalization manifests across multiple domains within sports.

All respondents agreed that the United States can be regarded as a leading example in

the utilization of digital technology and artificial intelligence, followed by the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, with the latter two primarily due to financial resources. In these countries—particularly in the USA—the entertainment of spectators and fans, and notably entire families, is managed in a highly complex manner, reflecting the fact that these sporting events function as family-oriented programs.

Hungary is considered competitive in the use of digital technology and artificial intelligence within the domain of sports events, although this largely depends on the event's budget. Beyond openness, there is a need to boldly adopt these technologies and to further develop entertainment aspects, with the USA serving as a prominent example in this regard.

Comparison of the examined events

A key similarity across all three international sports events analyzed is that the respective international federations (swimming and athletics) evaluated them as highly well-organized, which is a significant accolade for Hungary and confirms its competitiveness in hosting major international sporting events. Nonetheless, the World Aquatics (WA) expresses a desire for new directions, citing a decline in the popularity of these sports. They believe that broadcasts must become more marketable, necessitating increased drama, excitement, and audience engagement from the spectators' perspective.

Since swimming competitions are held in enclosed venues, the spectator atmosphere tends to be darker and less vibrant compared to events such as water polo matches, which are often hosted in open facilities. Consequently, the sport presentation teams must consider these factors when designing entertainment elements.

A further similarity observed across the three examined events was the inclusion of various interactive games involving audience participation (e.g., kiss cams, dance cams). Additionally, all events employed the so-called intro gate or intro card, a modernized method for athlete presentation involving short introductory video clips projected onto LED screens, allowing athletes to showcase themselves as they wish. Each sporting event featured mascots designed to entertain and engage the audience, thereby enhancing the spectator experience. In the United States, the tradition and application of mascots are more extensive and multifaceted compared to Hungary, where their presence is primarily limited to photo opportunities.

An innovation first introduced at FINA 2022—the intro gate and intro card—was subsequently adopted at other sporting events, including the 2023 World Athletics Championships held in Hungary, setting a precedent that other countries later followed. The "walking DJ," a performer carrying a DJ console on their shoulder while dressed as a disc jockey, also debuted at the Athletics World Championships and received great acclaim. While the concept holds potential for repeated use, it is challenging to find individuals capable of effectively engaging the audience and sustaining a vibrant atmosphere in this role. Alongside the walking DJ, the live music medal plaza also represented a novelty. This concept, later emulated at events in other countries, involved postponing the medal ceremonies to the day following the competitions, prior to the afternoon or evening sessions. This arrangement allowed athletes to celebrate their podium finishes directly in front of the spectators, fostering closer interaction between athletes and fans.

Another innovation at the Athletics World Championships was the presence of live intro bands performing as finalists entered the competition arena.

In 2024, artificial intelligence was employed for the first time at the Swimming Championships (25m) to entertain spectators through interactive singing games—an approach not used previously. In addition, the intro gate, which debuted in 2022, was updated with a revolving gate mechanism.

The interviews clearly revealed that the nature of the on-site audience on a given day significantly influences outcomes. It was frequently observed that what worked successfully on one day did not necessarily achieve similar success at another time. Often, less is more; for example, activating mobile phone cameras in the evening, coordinated wave motions, or encouraging the audience to sing or wave their hands can have a much greater impact during an event. This indicates that while digital solutions are effective, they do not always achieve the desired effect. As previously noted, digital technologies tend not to function well at smaller events but have a much higher likelihood of success at large international competitions.

An illustrative counterexample can be found in the World Athletics Championships and the Swimming Championships (25m), where one of the most popular audience engagement programs was the "T-shirt cannon." This device, which launches pre-packaged t-shirts using compressed gas, generated significant excitement, with spectators eagerly running to catch the apparel in the targeted zones. Many attendees appreciate receiving tangible items, and the t-shirt cannon served both as a physical giveaway and a memorable experience for the audience.

Another contemporary and much-discussed example highlights the drawbacks of digital technology use. Certain entertainment elements may pose significant risks; for instance, during a Coldplay concert in the summer of 2025, a segment featuring a couple who were later revealed not to be in a romantic relationship but instead had separate families, sparked widespread attention. The incident generated extensive online discourse and became a source of internet memes. From a research perspective, however, the focus lies not on the viral nature of the event but rather on the implications for entertainment programming. Specifically, it raises questions about the extent to which such entertainment is truly enjoyable for participants who may not wish to appear publicly, and concerns related to data protection regulations such as GDPR, as well as broader ethical and legal considerations.

Thus, while the application of these technologies can be innovative and engaging, their use also prompts numerous important questions. It was repeatedly noted that spectators often exhibited reluctance to participate in entertainment activities involving digital technology or artificial intelligence, frequently due to shyness or discomfort with public exposure, rendering such situations uncomfortable for them.

Future digital trends

The final section of the research focused on the anticipated changes in digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI) over the coming years, as perceived by the interviewed experts, and how these developments are expected to impact the organization of sporting events. All interviewees agreed that AI will continue to evolve and be increasingly utilized across a growing number of events, particularly as its most effective applications become better understood. Advancements are expected in lighting, sound technology, and imaging, alongside an expanded role for drones. AI will be progressively employed in visual design, control systems, data analysis, automation, and the deployment of intro cards, as well as in entertainment games, which are likely to have shorter life cycles and will require openness to innovation.

Event organizers, however, hold a somewhat different perspective regarding the role and future of AI. While they concur that AI's use will expand and become necessary in many areas, they question whether investing substantial resources and attention into AI is always justified or cost-effective. Notably, AI is not currently used in program editing but is applied in design planning. As previously discussed, audience activation through simple means—such as coordinated clapping, t-shirt cannons, or communal singing—generates significantly stronger experiences and atmospheres than digital interactions like playing games on mobile phones or mimicking emojis. The emphasis lies on evoking emotions and promoting physical

engagement.

Summary of the examined topics

Table 1. Result of the interview

Topic	Key Findings from Interviews	Comparative Insights
Competitiveness	Hungary is competitive in hosting large international sporting events; budget is the decisive factor.	Large-scale events allow more innovation than smaller or recurring events.
Audience Entertainment	Audience engagement is essential for creating memorable experiences.	Simple activation tools (clapping, singing, waves) often outperform digital games.
Digitalization	Digital technologies are fundamental and used in all phases of event management.	High effectiveness regardless of event type or size.
Artificial Intelligence (AI)	AI is in an early adoption phase; mainly used for planning, design, and idea generation.	Larger events are more capable of integrating AI solutions.
AI-based Entertainment	Innovative but costly and technically risky; requires extensive testing.	Frequently replaced by simpler, more reliable entertainment elements.
Athletes' Perspective	Reactions to show elements vary; some athletes experience discomfort.	Rehearsals help maintain concentration and acceptance.
International Comparison	The USA leads in digital and AI-driven entertainment, followed by the UK, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.	Financial resources strongly influence implementation depth.
Future Trends	Increasing AI use, automation, drones, and advanced visual technologies.	Shorter life cycles of entertainment concepts and growing need for innovation.

Source: Own editing

In summary, the interviews provided valuable and insightful information that complements the theoretical framework outlined earlier. Given that event management is a highly practical discipline, the study prioritized presenting practical examples and firsthand experiences that can be readily applied by professionals in the field.

Based on the above, the following conclusions can be drawn in response to the research questions.

Regarding the first question ("How do artificial intelligence-driven fan engagement tools influence audience interaction, emotional involvement, and overall satisfaction at international sporting events?"), the interviews with experts clearly indicate that we are still in the early stages of understanding how and in what forms AI can be effectively applied to engage audiences, and therefore experience remains limited. As mentioned, AI was first utilized for audience entertainment at the 2024 Swimming Championships (25m). This represented a novelty for both organizers and spectators. The reception of the face swap game was positive,

with fans expressing enjoyment. Future inquiries will focus on identifying additional entertaining elements that can be developed and implemented to enhance audience engagement. Consequently, limitations arise primarily from available funding, creativity, and the demographic composition of the audience.

However, it is also important to emphasize—based on the interview data—that simpler audience activation methods such as collective singing, coordinated clapping, and wave motions produced greater emotional involvement and satisfaction among spectators. These traditional forms of engagement remain the most effective and reliable means of fostering audience participation at sporting events.

Regarding the second research question ("What are the operational and strategic advantages of applying technologies such as IoT, AR/VR, and blockchain in event management?"), the focus primarily lies on the perspectives of event organizers and sports presentation teams. In contemporary event management, these technologies are indispensable; for example, real-time data on the number of spectators present at the venue directly influences the type, frequency, and duration of interactive games conducted. There have been instances where, despite the original schedule including the use of a T-shirt cannon, its deployment was cancelled due to insufficient audience numbers. LED walls and other projection technologies significantly enhance the fan experience, as the mode of communication—through graphics, sound, and lighting effects—plays a critical role in how effectively information and content are conveyed to the audience. The responsibility of the sports presentation team is to design increasingly engaging and impactful virtual and other elements to entertain spectators, for example by creating fan zones, quiz tasks, and providing additional statistics and information.

The third research question addressed how these technologies contribute to the long-term innovation, competitiveness, and sustainability of event management practices. Based on both interviews and our own experience, it can be concluded that the use of digital technologies is fundamental, as they are employed across all areas of event organization. The availability of documents such as event scripts in cloud storage supports sustainability by reducing the need for printed materials compared to previous practices. Artificial intelligence, however, represents a somewhat different case, as it is relatively new, and limited experience exists regarding its precise and effective applications. AI facilitates preparatory work, for instance, by assisting in writing running orders or compiling quiz questions. Conversely, AI-based entertainment games present more complex and costly challenges. Nonetheless, AI enables innovative solutions, and with accumulating experience from event to event, increasingly competitive applications can be developed.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the latest trends in digital and AI technologies within event management, with a particular focus on their application in Hungarian and international sports events. While digital technology is firmly established across all phases of event organization, AI remains in the early stages of adoption, constrained by budget, time, and familiarity. Tools that simultaneously enhance audience experience and operational efficiency offer the highest added value.

The results of the expert interviews conducted as part of the primary research reveal that while digital technology has become an indispensable prerequisite in all phases of event organization, the application of artificial intelligence remains in an experimental stage, often constrained by limitations in budget, time, or expertise. The findings indicate that the tools delivering the greatest added value are those capable of simultaneously enhancing audience experience and supporting organizational efficiency. At the same time, the interviews

emphasize that audience engagement is often achieved most reliably through simple, low-cost methods (e.g., orchestrated applause, audience waves, T-shirt cannons).

Case studies from FINA 2022, the 2023 World Athletics Championships, and the 2024 Swimming Championships (25m) demonstrate Hungary's competitiveness in hosting large-scale international events, while also revealing opportunities for further development in entertainment and interactive elements. For successful future integration, expanding technical expertise, fostering creativity, and considering audience receptiveness will be essential.

Based on the interviews, a clear distinction emerges between the perceptions of digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI). While digitalization has become a fundamental and indispensable tool in event management, the application of AI remains largely experimental, primarily serving supportive functions such as planning and preparation.

A comparison of the examined events indicates that large international sporting events provide a more favorable environment for testing innovative digital and AI-based solutions, whereas the effectiveness and return on investment of these technologies are more limited at smaller-scale events.

In terms of audience entertainment, the interviews consistently highlighted that simple, emotionally engaging, and community-oriented activities (e.g., collective singing, clapping, waves, T-shirt cannons) often have a greater impact than costly and technologically complex digital games. This finding was recurrent across multiple events and respondents.

From an international perspective, Hungary can be considered competitive, particularly in terms of organizational quality and innovation. However, budgetary constraints and audience receptiveness represent significant influencing factors. The example of the United States demonstrates that the effective implementation of advanced technological solutions and complex entertainment concepts is closely linked to adequate financial and cultural resources.

The research findings contribute to the strategic and informed use of technological innovations in event management, aiming to enhance long-term competitiveness, sustainability, and the overall audience experience.

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MOTIVATIONS FOR TRAVEL AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN ALGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Travel motivations shape tourism behavior and influence how destinations are promoted. This study investigates the motivations of 168 young adults in Algeria. Findings indicate that vacations are the main reason for travel (58.3%), followed by combinations of religious trips (Hadj/Umra), healthcare, business, and study-related purposes. While some respondents travel for a single motivation, a substantial portion plan trips based on multiple factors, reflecting diverse and multifunctional travel behavior. The results suggest that young Algerian travelers are not solely leisure-focused but consider a variety of purposes when choosing destinations. These insights can guide tourism marketers, destination managers, and policymakers in developing targeted services, packages, and promotional strategies that cater to both leisure and multifunctional travel needs. Recognizing the range of motivations can enhance tourist satisfaction, engagement, and overall tourism development in the region.*

KEYWORDS: *Travel motivations, leisure tourism, multifunctional travel, young adults, Algeria*

INTRODUCTION

As tourism experiences rapid growth in the wake of global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential for both scholars and practitioners to comprehend the motivations that influence travel decisions. Travel motivation encompasses the internal and external factors that ignite an individual's desire to travel, including psychological needs, social aspirations, and contextual influences (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977). These motivational factors are particularly prominent among young adults, who constitute a vibrant segment of the tourism market due to their adaptability, changing preferences, and increasing economic impact (Popşa, 2024; Marques et al., 2025). Despite its economic and cultural importance, there is a notable lack of research concentrating on travel motivations specifically within the Algerian context, especially among young adult travelers. This literature review integrates both contemporary and foundational studies on travel motivations, emphasizing youth travel, multifunctional motivations, and cultural and demographic influences, while also formulating hypotheses for empirical exploration.

Emerging studies indicate that digital platforms play a pivotal role in shaping travel expectations and motivations. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, influence destination imagery and perceived value among young travelers, while broader structural factors such as tourism competitiveness and socio-economic conditions also affect travel behavior and tourism interest (Baouali et al., 2019; Boukhedimi, 2025).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Theoretical Foundations of Travel Motivation

Travel motivation has been a focal point in tourism research for many years, with researchers creating conceptual frameworks to elucidate the reasons individuals opt to travel, their chosen destinations, and the outcomes they aim to achieve. Among the seminal contributions in this field is Dann's (1977) model, which differentiates between anomie the urge to break free from the monotony of daily life and ego-enhancement the quest for validation and identity through travel. This foundational work established a basis for perceiving travel as more than mere leisure activity, framing it as a behavior driven by psychological factors.

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Expanding on this groundwork, Crompton's (1979) push–pull theory has become one of the most extensively utilized frameworks in the study of tourism motivation. In this theoretical model, push motivations represent internal psychological drivers (such as the desire for relaxation, novelty, and escape), while pull motivations stem from the characteristics of the destination (including cultural attractions, natural beauty, and safety). The interaction between push and pull factors offers a holistic perspective on travel behavior across various contexts.

Iso-Ahola (1982) further developed motivational theory by suggesting that tourists pursue both an escape from their daily surroundings and the chance to attain intrinsic rewards. This duality emphasizes the notion that travel motivations are complex, stemming from both the wish to break free from one's routine and the aspiration to achieve fulfillment through novel experiences.

Recent contributions have built upon these frameworks. For instance, Pearce's (2005) Travel Career Pattern (TCP) theory posits that an individual's travel motivations change throughout their life, with younger travelers frequently emphasizing novelty and social interaction, while older travelers tend to seek self-actualization and more profound cultural experiences.

These foundational theories have been enhanced and expanded in contemporary empirical research that underscores the impact of demographic factors and modern lifestyle changes. Acknowledging the intricacy of motivational drivers is especially crucial when examining young adults, who display a combination of traditional and emerging motivators influenced by socio-cultural and technological environments (Marques et al., 2025).

1.2. Youth and Generation Z Travel Motivations

Recent studies highlight the unique characteristics of travel motivations in Generation Z and young adult travelers. As digital natives born from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s, Gen Z's travel behaviors are influenced by technology, cultural exposure, and shifting values. Marques et al. (2025) indicate that demographic elements such as age, gender, and geographic location play a significant role in shaping travel motivations within Gen Z, revealing differences in preferences between urban and rural travelers, as well as between male and female travelers. For instance, urban participants tend to prioritize social engagement and new experiences, whereas rural participants may focus more on independence and personal growth (Marques et al., 2025).

In addition, studies show that younger travelers increasingly seek sustainable and experience-oriented travel options. Marlina et al. (2026) report a shift in Gen Z travel preferences toward *eco-experiential tourism*, where travelers prioritize cultural immersion, unique natural environments, and authentic experiences over traditional, comfort-oriented leisure tourism. This shift underscores the role of experiential and sustainability values in shaping travel motivations for young adults.

Moreover, research on touristic behaviors during contemporary conditions suggests that environmental awareness and social values are influential among young tourists. Konieczna & Trybuś-Borowiecka (2025) highlight that financial constraints and environmental concerns can reduce travel frequency among Gen Z, indicating that motivations are not only about desire but also shaped by contextual barriers and ethical considerations.

Finally, emerging studies indicate that digital platforms play a pivotal role in shaping travel expectations and motivations. Social media, particularly platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, influence destination imagery and perceived value, with young travelers increasingly integrating digital self-representation into their travel motivations (Hussain et al., 2024; Popşa, 2024).

In summary, these studies illustrate that young travelers' motivations are hybrid

blending traditional constructs such as leisure and escape with contemporary values such as sustainability, digital expression, and cultural engagement.

1.3. Multifunctional Travel Motivations: Beyond Leisure

While conventional tourism studies have typically regarded leisure as the main motivation for travel, recent research indicates an increasing recognition of multifunctional travel behavior. This notion refers to travel choices influenced by various factors, where individuals merge leisure with business, education, religious commitments, or health-related purposes. This phenomenon mirrors wider lifestyle trends among young adults who aim to optimize both personal and professional benefits through travel.

Multifunctionality corresponds with McCabe's (2009) viewpoint that tourists frequently organize trips to accomplish a range of goals, especially in contexts where economic efficiency and time management are prioritized. This complex approach is not solely motivated by economic factors but also signifies the development of identity and social capital.

Evidence supporting multifunctional travel is surfacing in global youth travel research. For example, Generation Z travelers indicate a tendency to blend cultural experiences and social engagements within their broader travel plans, suggesting that travel motivations cannot be confined to a single aspect (Kılıçarslan & Kaçmaz, 2025). These insights imply that young adults perceive travel as a way to satisfy multiple psychological, social, and experiential needs at once.

1.4. Cultural, Social, and Demographic Influences on Motivation

Demographic factors such as age, gender, and place of residence are crucial in comprehending travel motivations. According to Marques et al. (2025), motivations vary within Generation Z according to these demographic aspects, with empirical evidence indicating notable differences in the prioritization of travel objectives among young travelers. For instance, women may place a higher value on personal growth and social interactions, whereas men might focus more on adventure and nature-related pursuits (Marques et al., 2025).

Moreover, the distinction between urban and rural residence seems to influence motivational trends. Urban dwellers, owing to their greater exposure to a variety of cultural experiences and travel information, typically pursue novelty and social connections more than their rural counterparts, who may prioritize independence and the depth of experiences.

Cultural background also influences what young travelers value during travel. Studies in different regions show that cultural heritage, historical sites, and interactive cultural activities strongly motivate young tourists' destination choices, reflecting a shift from recreational motives toward cultural engagement (Popşa, 2024; Akgiş İlhan et al., 2022; Khuc et al., 2025).

Furthermore, younger cohorts are increasingly motivated by sustainability and ethical considerations, often shaped by socio-environmental consciousness. This pro-environmental orientation may moderate traditional leisure motivations and shift travel preferences toward destinations that support ethical and sustainable tourism practices.

1.5. Methodological Considerations

Developing empirical research to evaluate these hypotheses necessitates a strong methodological foundation. Quantitative survey techniques continue to be the predominant method in travel motivation studies, offering standardized data to analyze motivational factors and demographic impacts. Research conducted by Marques et al. (2025) utilizes quantitative survey tools and regression analysis to investigate demographic influences, illustrating the effectiveness of these methods for hypothesis testing within youth tourism settings. Considering the complex nature of motivation, mixed-methods strategies can enhance understanding by facilitating qualitative investigations into intricate motivational elements that standardized questionnaires may not adequately capture. For instance, Marlina et al. (2026) integrate

quantitative push–pull evaluations with qualitative interviews to uncover more profound insights into eco-experiential preferences among Generation Z travelers.

Furthermore, the application of structural equation modeling (SEM) or factor analysis is advisable for the examination of latent motivational constructs and for testing the interrelations among variables, particularly when assessing the moderating effects of digital influence and sustainability.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a **quantitative cross-sectional survey design** to examine travel motivations among young adults in Algeria during June 2023 to January 2024, among 168 participants. A quantitative approach is appropriate when the objective is to measure patterns, relationships, and prevalence within a defined population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Cross-sectional surveys are widely used in tourism motivation research due to their efficiency in capturing behavioral intentions and motivational structures at a specific point in time (Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

The study aimed to:

Identify dominant travel motivations among Algerian youth.

Examine the presence of multifunctional travel behavior.

Explore relationships between primary and secondary travel purposes.

2.2 Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of **Algerian young adults aged 18–35 years.** This age group corresponds to emerging adults and young professionals, who represent a dynamic and increasingly mobile tourism segment (UNWTO, 2023).

A **non-probability convenience sampling technique** was employed due to accessibility and time constraints. While probability sampling improves generalizability, convenience sampling remains acceptable in exploratory tourism motivation studies (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016), particularly when studying youth populations.

A total of **168 valid responses** were collected. According to methodological standards, a sample exceeding 150 respondents is adequate for descriptive and basic inferential statistical analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

2.3 Instrument Development

Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire aimed at capturing demographic characteristics and travel motivation patterns among young Algerian adults. The instrument was organized into three primary sections. The first section collected demographic data, such as age, gender, and education level, to facilitate descriptive profiling and potential subgroup comparisons. The second section concentrated on identifying the respondent's main travel motivation, while the third section investigated secondary or multiple motivations to uncover multifunctional travel behavior.

The motivational categories included in the questionnaire were derived from well-established theoretical frameworks in tourism research. Initially, the Push–Pull Theory developed by Crompton (1979) provided the foundational framework for differentiating between internal psychological drivers (push factors) and destination-based attractions (pull factors). Push factors generally encompass escape, relaxation, socialization, and self-fulfillment, while pull factors pertain to destination characteristics such as religious sites, healthcare facilities, educational institutions, or business opportunities. This framework ensured that the motivational categories represented both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of travel behavior.

Furthermore, Pearce's (2005) Travel Career Pattern (TCP) theory guided the inclusion of diverse and evolving motivations. According to the TCP model, travel motivations evolve and diversify as individuals gain travel experience and undergo life-stage transitions. Young adults, in particular, may concurrently seek novelty, social bonding, self-development, and status-related motives. By incorporating this theoretical perspective, the study aimed to investigate whether Algerian youth exhibit complex and layered motivational structures rather than merely single-purpose travel decisions.

Thirdly, the notion of multifunctional travel, as articulated by McCabe (2009), informed the incorporation of travel options that serve multiple purposes. Multifunctional travel denotes the strategic amalgamation of various objectives within a single journey, frequently motivated by economic efficiency, time limitations, or social responsibilities. This viewpoint is especially pertinent in emerging tourism markets, where travelers may maximize their limited travel opportunities by merging leisure, religious, educational, or professional aims.

Participants were invited to identify their primary travel motivation from a set of predefined categories based on these frameworks. The available options encompassed vacations/leisure, religious travel (Hadj/Umra), healthcare, business, study, and a combination of purposes. The addition of a "combination of purposes" category facilitated the recognition of respondents whose travel patterns exhibit multifunctionality rather than a singular predominant motivation. This categorical framework ensured conceptual coherence with established tourism theories while remaining contextually pertinent to the Algerian socio-cultural landscape.

In summary, the design of the questionnaire achieved a balance between theoretical rigor and contextual flexibility, thereby ensuring both construct validity and practical significance for examining youth travel motivations in Algeria.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, primarily frequencies and percentages, to identify dominant travel motivations and behavioral patterns within the sample. Descriptive statistics are particularly appropriate in exploratory tourism research when the objective is to summarize and present distributional characteristics of categorical variables (Field, 2018). Given that the study aimed to determine the prevalence of specific motivational categories rather than test causal relationships, descriptive analysis provided a clear and interpretable overview of youth travel tendencies in Algeria.

The percentage of respondents selecting each motivational category was calculated using the standard formula:

Percentage = (frequency / total sample) × 100

This calculation enabled the proportional representation of each travel motive relative to the total sample (n = 168), facilitating comparative interpretation across categories. Presenting results in percentage form enhances clarity and allows for meaningful discussion of dominant and secondary motivations within the youth segment.

In addition to univariate descriptive analysis, cross-tabulations were conducted to examine patterns of multifunctional travel behavior. Cross-tabulation analysis is widely used in social science research to explore relationships between categorical variables and to identify co-occurrence patterns (Hair et al., 2019). In this study, cross-tabulations enabled the examination of how primary motivations intersected with secondary travel purposes, thereby revealing the extent to which respondents combined leisure with religious, educational, healthcare, or business objectives.

The use of cross-tabulation was methodologically justified given the categorical nature of the variables and the study's focus on behavioral patterns rather than predictive modeling.

This approach allowed for the identification of multidimensional travel strategies among Algerian youth, supporting the theoretical framing of multifunctional travel. Although inferential techniques such as chi-square tests or structural equation modeling could further assess statistical associations, the present study prioritizes descriptive clarity and foundational pattern identification as a first step in understanding youth travel motivations in the Algerian context.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Demographic Overview

The sample consisted of 168 young adults aged between 18 and 35 years. The majority were university students or early-career professionals, reflecting a socioeconomically active youth segment.

3.2 Primary Travel Motivations

The analysis of the survey data revealed that vacations and leisure activities constituted the primary travel motivation for the majority of respondents (58.3%). This finding confirms the continuing prominence of leisure as a central driver of tourism among young adults, consistent with the push–pull theoretical framework where internal desires for relaxation, escape, and novelty strongly influence travel decisions (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977). Leisure travel appears to remain a critical aspect of youth tourism behavior in Algeria, reflecting similar trends observed in global studies of Generation Z and young adult travelers (Marques et al., 2025; Marlina et al., 2026).

Conversely, 41.7% of respondents reported motivations other than pure leisure, indicating that a substantial proportion of young Algerians pursue travel for multiple purposes. These non-leisure motivations included religious travel (Hadj/Umra), healthcare, business, study-related trips, and combinations of purposes. The distribution suggests that while leisure dominates, young adults in Algeria frequently integrate other objectives into their travel plans, highlighting the multifunctional nature of contemporary youth tourism.

The co-existence of leisure and non-leisure motivations aligns with the concept of multifunctional travel proposed by McCabe (2009), whereby travelers strategically optimize trips to satisfy diverse personal, social, and professional objectives. Such patterns reflect a practical and culturally informed approach to travel decision-making, particularly relevant in contexts where opportunities for long-distance travel may be limited by economic or logistical factors. These findings underscore the importance of acknowledging both primary and secondary motivations in understanding youth travel behavior and provide a basis for further exploration of demographic influences and motivational hierarchies in subsequent analyses.

3.3 Multifunctional Travel Behavior

A notable proportion of respondents reported engaging in **multifunctional travel,** whereby a single trip served multiple purposes. Examples included **combining religious travel with leisure activities, integrating study trips with tourism, or coupling medical travel with family visits.** This behavioral pattern illustrates that young Algerian travelers do not exclusively pursue a single objective but strategically optimize travel opportunities to meet diverse needs. Such multifunctional travel aligns with McCabe's (2009) conceptualization, which emphasizes the practical and experiential benefits of combining objectives within a single journey.

Moreover, these findings are consistent with Pearce's (2005) **Travel Career Pattern (TCP) theory,** which posits that as individuals accumulate travel experience, their motivations become more complex and multifaceted. Younger travelers, particularly those in the 18–35 age range, may initially focus on leisure but gradually integrate additional purposes such as

education, religious observance, or social engagement into their trips. The convergence of multifunctional behavior and evolving motivational patterns underscores the dynamic nature of youth travel and highlights the importance of considering multiple dimensions of motivation when analyzing tourism behavior.

3.4 Interpretation of Motivational Patterns

The predominance of leisure travel, reported by 58.3% of respondents, reflects classical **push motivations** such as the desire for relaxation, escape from routine, and recreation (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977). Leisure remains a central driver of youth tourism in Algeria, consistent with global trends among young adult and Generation Z travelers (Marques et al., 2025). However, the substantial proportion of respondents engaging in **combined or multifunctional travel** suggests that Algerian youth adopt a strategic approach to travel planning, integrating multiple objectives within a single trip.

Several contextual factors may contribute to this behavior. **Economic considerations,** such as budget constraints and cost optimization, likely encourage travelers to maximize the utility of each trip. **Limited travel opportunities,** whether due to visa restrictions, transportation costs, or academic and work obligations, may also incentivize the consolidation of multiple purposes into one journey. Additionally, **cultural norms emphasizing family responsibilities and religious obligations** appear to shape travel choices, particularly regarding the integration of pilgrimage (Hadj/Umra) with leisure or social activities. This combination of practical and cultural influences highlights the complex, multifunctional nature of youth travel behavior in Algeria and underscores the need for tourism strategies that accommodate diverse traveler objectives.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Leisure as the Primary Driver

The predominance of vacation travel among young Algerian adults aligns with **global tourism trends,** which consistently identify leisure as a primary motivator for travel (UNWTO, 2023). For young adults, leisure travel often serves as a mechanism for **psychological escape** from academic pressures, early-career responsibilities, and routine daily life. This observation is consistent with **push-factor theory**, which emphasizes that internal psychological needs such as relaxation, novelty seeking, and self-fulfillment are central drivers of tourism behavior (Dann, 1977).

However, the findings indicate that Algerian youth do not conform to purely hedonic travel models. Instead, they exhibit **diversified and multifunctional travel intentions,** integrating leisure with educational, religious, health-related, or social objectives. This complexity underscores the need to move beyond single-purpose motivational frameworks and consider **contextual, economic, and cultural influences** when analyzing youth tourism behavior in Algeria. The observed patterns reflect a strategic and adaptive approach to travel, in which young adults balance multiple objectives within limited time and resource constraints.

4.2 Emergence of Multifunctional Travel

The results offer substantial empirical evidence supporting the notion that young Algerian travelers often partake in multifunctional travel behaviors. This is consistent with recent studies suggesting that contemporary travelers frequently seek to optimize their travel experience by merging various objectives within a single journey (Kılıçarslan & Kaçmaz, 2025). Economic factors are likely to be particularly significant in developing regions, where the expenses related to international or long-distance travel may encourage the combination of leisure with other purposes.

In addition to economic motivations, the multifunctional travel patterns observed among

Algerian youth seem to be shaped by social responsibilities, religious obligations, and the pursuit of educational opportunities. For instance, journeys may integrate family visits with pilgrimage, academic travel with cultural exploration, or healthcare needs with recreational activities. These trends demonstrate that youth tourism is fundamentally intricate and multifaceted, and cannot be fully comprehended through a solely leisure-oriented perspective. Therefore, acknowledging the prevalence of multifunctional travel is essential for tourism scholars and policymakers, as it underscores the necessity of developing travel products and services that cater to the varied motivations and practical needs of young travelers.

4.3 Religious and Cultural Dimensions

Religious travel remains a prominent motivation for young Algerian adults. Activities associated with pilgrimage, such as undertaking Umra or Hadj, are not solely spiritual in nature; they frequently incorporate elements of leisure, shopping, and social interaction. This fusion of sacred and secular aims illustrates broader contemporary shifts in religious tourism, where traditional pilgrimage increasingly adopts a multifunctional and experience-driven approach (Rinschede, 1992; Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 2025).

Such trends indicate that Algerian youth engage with religious travel in a pragmatic manner, pursuing both spiritual enrichment and avenues for leisure or social engagement. This multifunctional perspective emphasizes the changing dynamics of tourism motivations, highlighting the necessity for destination managers and policymakers to create integrated travel experiences that cater to both cultural and recreational goals. Grasping this amalgamation of motivations is crucial for customizing marketing strategies and improving tourist satisfaction in scenarios where spiritual, cultural, and leisure aspirations converge.

CONCLUSION

The existing literature suggests that the motivations for travel among young adults are complex and ever-changing, influenced by a combination of psychological needs, cultural values, demographic factors, and current lifestyle trends. Although traditional motivations such as leisure and the desire to escape continue to hold significance, new priorities like sustainability, cultural immersion, digital interaction, and multifunctional travel goals are increasingly shaping destination preferences and travel behaviors.

In the context of Algeria, the integration of foundational theories with contemporary empirical findings uncovers a detailed motivational profile among young travelers, which mirrors both global trends and local socio-cultural contexts. The hypotheses developed in this research establish a robust framework for future empirical investigations and provide meaningful contributions to both theoretical knowledge and practical applications within the tourism sector. Understanding these intricate motivational dynamics is crucial for crafting effective marketing strategies, creating customized travel offerings, and improving the overall tourism experience for young adults in Algeria.

This study makes several important contributions to tourism theory. First, it **confirms the continued relevance of Push–Pull Theory** (Crompton, 1979) in North African contexts, demonstrating that internal psychological drivers and destination attributes remain central to travel motivation among young adults. Second, it provides **empirical support for Pearce's Travel Career Pattern (TCP) theory** (2005), showing that as young travelers gain experience, their motivations diversify and evolve to include multiple objectives beyond simple leisure. Third, the study **strengthens the conceptualization of multifunctional youth travel** in developing economies, highlighting how economic, cultural, social, and religious factors converge to shape complex travel behaviors. Collectively, these contributions advance the theoretical understanding of youth tourism, particularly in regions where travel opportunities

are influenced by both socio-economic constraints and cultural traditions.

The results hold significant implications for tourism stakeholders in Algeria. Firstly, there exists a distinct opportunity to create integrated travel packages that merge religious, leisure, and cultural experiences, thereby addressing the multifaceted motivations of young travelers. Secondly, the promotion of educational tourism aimed at youth can cater to the increasing demand for study-related and culturally immersive journeys. Thirdly, the development of affordable multifunctional travel bundles can assist young adults in maximizing their limited resources while achieving various travel goals. Lastly, enhancing marketing segmentation to specifically target young adults can ensure that promotional strategies align with their diverse motivational profiles.

Overall, destination managers should recognize that **youth travelers are strategic decision-makers,** balancing leisure with educational, religious, social, and economic considerations, rather than being solely leisure-focused. Acknowledging this complexity allows tourism providers to create products and services that better satisfy the needs of young Algerian travelers and enhance overall destination competitiveness.

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SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL REGIONS

Gergana Arshinkova[1]

ABSTRACT: *This study examines the structural challenges and policy responses shaping rural development in Bulgaria, with a focus on rural regions. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research maps spatial disparities in financial support, productivity, demographic dynamics and environmental compliance. Results show that subsidy distribution disproportionately benefits large-scale, lowland monocultural producers, while small, diversified and mountain holdings receive less support yet display greater resilience. Key barriers for smallholders include administrative complexity, limited access to finance and technical training, and misalignment between centralized policy instruments and local ecological/geographic needs. The study finds potential in short supply chains, local product specialization, digitalization, producer cooperatives, agro tourism and "smart village" concepts to strengthen regional value chains and demographic stability.*

KEYWORDS: *rural regions, sustainable development, socio-economic challenges, socio-economic opportunities*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, rural Bulgarian regions have experienced profound socio-economic transformations, characterized by significant intra-regional disparities and long-term demographic challenges. These structural shifts, exacerbated by sector-wide polarization and an aging workforce, have necessitated a critical re-evaluation of the Common Agricultural Policy's effectiveness in fostering balanced territorial development (Atanasov et al., 2023). Rural regions in Bulgaria possess complex structures and features related to morphology and various natural factors. Specifically, these regions are experiencing a "fast pace of desertification of fertile land," which is occurring with greater force in mountain and hill regions. This physical decline is mirrored by a demographic one: the population still engaged in mountain agriculture is progressively aging, as fewer Bulgarians are actively involved in these activities due to the low ratio of labor input to income (Patarchanov, 2010).

Furthermore, the persistence of depopulation and rural marginalization highlights an urgent need to transition toward decentralized, territory-based development models that better integrate local market opportunities with innovative agricultural practices. Addressing these systemic imbalances requires a holistic approach that moves beyond traditional agricultural support to encompass broader rural economy integration and the mitigation of regional disparities (Beluhova-Uzunova and Hristov, 2020; Atanasov et al., 2023). This study examines the interplay between institutional support mechanisms and the socioeconomic vulnerabilities inherent in current rural households, emphasizing the potential of short supply chains and local product specialization to enhance regional resilience. By analysing the efficacy of these integrated approaches, this research contributes to the discourse on fostering inclusive growth through enhanced policy coordination and the modernization of local agribusiness. Specifically, the research evaluates how digital transformation and the adoption of information and communication technologies might mitigate the labour shortages and productivity gaps currently hindering the competitiveness of small-scale farms.

Rural regions in Bulgaria represent a significant portion of the national landscape, covering approximately 81% of the territory and housing 43% of the population (Patarchanova, et al, 2012). Despite their geographic dominance, these areas are often characterized as

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"backward" in socio-economic development, functioning as a periphery that struggles to generate stable positive change. The development of these regions is constrained by a "services crisis," which includes critical issues such as poverty, discontinued education, and poor healthcare access. Additionally, the persistent out-migration of the youth demographic further erodes the local human capital base, undermining the long-term viability of community-led sustainable initiatives (Angelov, et al, 2024).

The current academic discourse emphasizes the tripartite framework of environmental, social, and economic sustainability as a necessary foundation for reshaped rural policy (Atanasov et al., 2023). Historically, agriculture in the Bulgarian mountains was more than an occupation; it was a "tradition and a lifestyle" that decided the fate of whole families. However, modern economic competition and the global crisis have decreased the motivation to live and work in the mountains, defining them as "unattractive places," particularly for young people (Patarchanov, 2010). Research emphasizes that most policies pursued in these areas are purely sectoral and often fail to account for the specific geographical environment or the unique socio-economic needs of mountain communities.

The integrated development of mountain regions is examined specifically examining the spatial aspects and the regional and local characteristics of development policies within the European Union. His work highlights the importance of tailoring these policies to the specific socio-economic and geographic contexts of mountain areas to ensure effective regional transformation (Патарчанов, 2015). Similarly, other scholars argue that overcoming rural marginalization requires moving beyond traditional agricultural support programs to encompass the broader dynamics of urban-rural interdependencies. Recent research specifically highlights the potential for strengthening regional value chains by fostering collaboration between agricultural producers and processing enterprises, thereby promoting a more robust "green economy" (Petrov & Borisov, 2024). Moreover, regional strategies increasingly prioritize the development of short food supply chains, which facilitate essential cooperation and knowledge transfer among local stakeholder. Such mechanisms generate virtuous cycles that enhance the adaptive capacity of small-scale producers, driving sustainable growth and contributing to resilient local communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a multi-methodological approach to assess regional disparities by analyzing institutional data alongside sectoral performance indicators across Bulgarian planning regions. Specifically, the analysis utilizes correlation methods to determine the impact of subsidy distribution on the utilized agricultural area and the operational status of regional holdings (Petrov & Borisov, 2024). Furthermore, qualitative interviews with regional agricultural managers provide insights into how specific institutional designations and geographical advantages influence individual farm sustainability (Bachev, 2018). By integrating these diverse data streams, the research establishes a comparative framework that highlights the specific socio-economic bottlenecks hindering regional growth. The methodology further incorporates the Relative Comparative Assessment technique to construct an index of socio-economic sustainability, enabling a standardized evaluation across the smallest administrative units defined by the NUTS classification. This classification is examined by Patarchanova, et al (2012) and Table 1 shows that Bulgaria has 2 regions in NUTS 1 level.

Table 1. NUTS classification in Bulgaria. Source: Patarchanova, et al (2012)

Countries	NUTS 1	NUTS 2	NUTS 3
EU members 27	97	271	1303
Bulgaria BG	Regions 2	Planning regions 6	Districts 28

This index quantifies the final level of socio-economic development, facilitating a granular comparison of regional performance metrics. Additionally, the research integrates a systemic analysis of environmental compliance requirements to assess how current regulatory frameworks influence the economic viability of farms across diverse rural landscapes. As seen is Figure 1, with 66.9% is North-West Bulgaria representing the worst demographical structure.

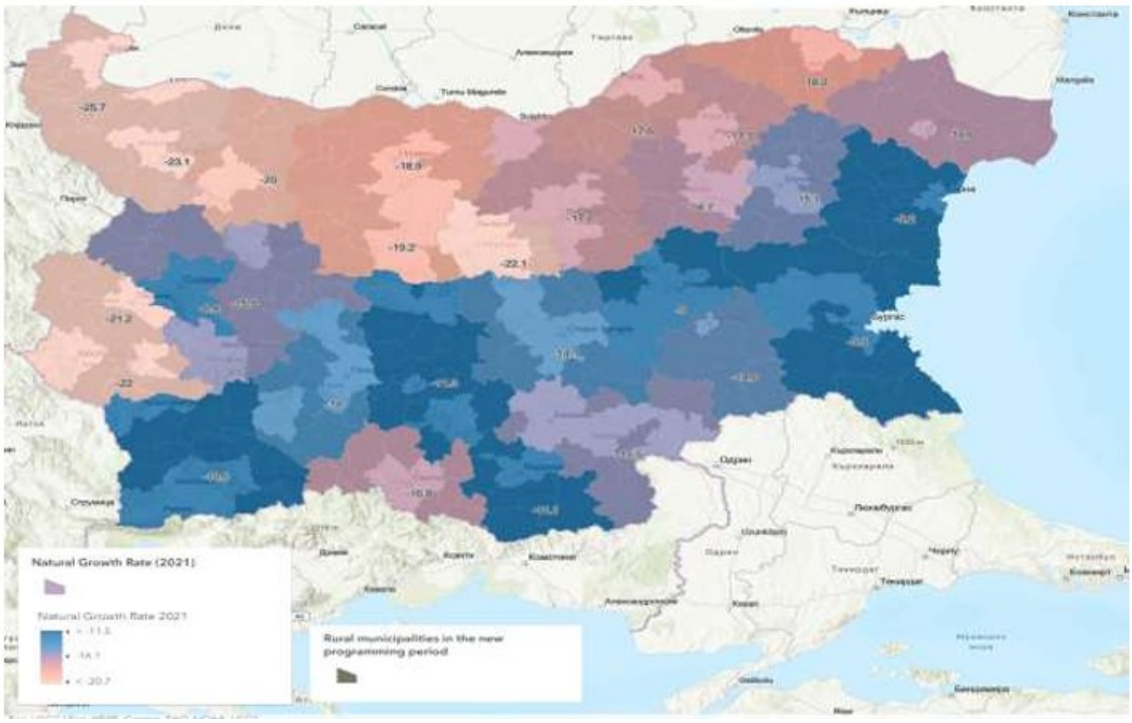

Figure 1. The rate of natural increase by regions at NUTS level 2 (in %) Source: Doitchinova & Lazarova (2023).

Furthermore, this study employs an Analytical Hierarchical Process to disentangle the complex relationships between socio-economic farm parameters and the successful implementation of soil restoration strategies (Nikolov et al., 2024). This evaluative framework is informed by in-depth interviews with managers of representative market-oriented farms, ensuring that the qualitative data reflects the diverse juridical types and geographical specificities of the Bulgarian agricultural sector (Bachev, 2018). Such empirical evidence is triangulated with longitudinal data from the Farm Accountancy Data Network and national agro statistics to ensure a robust representation of structural transformations within the sector. The resulting datasets are subsequently normalized to facilitate a cross-regional synthesis, ensuring that the influence of external market dynamics and domestic policy support is accurately captured across the studied administrative units.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical analysis reveals significant regional variations in financial allocation, with farms in the Plain and Plain-mountainous regions demonstrating higher participation rates in public investment subsidies compared to those located in protected or mountainous zones (Bachev, 2018). Despite this financial infusion, the North-West planning region exhibits a persistent paradox where extensive cereal production receives substantial support yet correlates with lower per capita GDP (Atanasov et al., 2023).

Conversely, smaller holdings focused on diversified agricultural output demonstrate higher resilience to market fluctuations, despite receiving disproportionately less funding compared to large-scale, monocultural enterprises. This pattern suggests that current distribution mechanisms inadvertently favor capital-intensive operations at the expense of regional economic diversification. Such findings underscore that while subsidies provide essential financial backing, their long-term impact on structural agricultural transformation remains constrained by their concentration among large-scale entities (Petrov, 2025). Moreover, the implementation of soil restoration strategies demonstrates that socio-economic factors such as access to financing and specialized training are critical determinants of farm-level adaptive capacity. Furthermore, the qualitative data indicates that producers prioritizing sustainable soil management often struggle with institutional barriers, as current bureaucratic requirements frequently outpace the technical expertise available to smaller operational units (Nikolov et al., 2024). Additionally, these challenges are compounded by a lack of coordination between centralized policy objectives and the localized needs of smallholders, which limits the efficacy of environmental compliance efforts.

Moreover, this misalignment highlights the necessity of fine-tuning regional interventions to specific ecological and socio-economic contexts to ensure that both agricultural policy and environmental sustainability objectives are mutually reinforcing. These observed disparities emphasize the critical need for integrating institutional capacity-building with flexible policy designs that support the scaling of local innovations. Integrating these findings with broader European trends, it becomes evident that the efficacy of land-based support is notably heterogeneous, necessitating a transition toward spatially targeted interventions that account for the unique socio-economic and environmental configurations of Bulgaria's diverse rural ecosystems (Bachev, 2018). Such targeted strategies must prioritize the reduction of administrative complexity for smallholders, as the current burden of compliance significantly hinders the uptake of essential agro-environmental practices.

This discrepancy underscores the failure of broad-based policy instruments to address the specific structural limitations of small-scale holdings and subsistence farming, which remain largely excluded from current modernization incentives. Moreover, the continued reliance on monocultural production models in these territories severely limits the potential for economic diversification and exacerbates the vulnerability of local rural economies to market fluctuations. Addressing these structural impediments requires a shift toward value-added production strategies that integrate the specific preferences of contemporary consumers with local processing capabilities (Doitchinova and Lazarova, 2023).

To mitigate these challenges, revitalizing rural vitality necessitates a comprehensive policy framework that prioritizes the digitalization of essential services and fosters an environment conducive to social entrepreneurship (Beluhova-Uzunova and Hristov, 2020). Furthermore, fostering cooperation among local producers is essential to leverage traditional Bulgarian practices and enhance the effectiveness of collective agro-environmental measures. Policy interventions must therefore pivot toward supporting the establishment of producer cooperatives, which facilitate the aggregation of supply and improve market access for

geographically dispersed enterprises. Such collective efforts remain essential for transitioning from subsistence-based models toward competitive, market-oriented production systems that capitalize on regional comparative advantages.

Additionally, addressing the integration of agro tourism into the local economy could help define unique, integrated regional products, thereby diversifying income sources and mitigating the current inefficiencies in the agrarian sector (Petrov and Borisov, 2024). The marginalization of mountain areas at regional levels is often a result of "hacking public policies" to be equivalent to those in lowland areas, ignoring the acute impact of challenges like climate change and demographic transition in high-altitude zones. To ensure the sustainable development of these territories, "specific answers" are required to overcome the loss of regional identity and the low quality of life (Patarchanov, 2010).

Research indicates a persistent depopulation trend characterized by "extremely low" fertility and high mortality (Doitchinova and Lazarova, 2023). Furthermore, data from the National Statistical Institute confirms that these trends are compounded by a consistent net migration flow toward core urban centers, leading to the severe contraction of human capital in peripheral municipalities. In addition, the availability of social services per 1,000 people, contrasting urban and rural areas (Miroslavova et al., 2013). The analysis reveals that rural municipalities with limited access to essential health and educational facilities demonstrate a higher propensity for economic stagnation compared to those with well-developed social networks. Consequently, integrating functional territorial planning with upgraded productive infrastructure is essential to retain young households and stabilize these declining territories.

Strategic territorial reorganization, potentially involving the consolidation of smaller local administrative units, could further enhance governance efficiency and improve resident access to critical public services. Furthermore, leveraging cross-border collaboration and decentralized digital service delivery models may mitigate the inherent geographical isolation faced by these communities. These interventions must be coupled with targeted investments in local entrepreneurship to foster economic resilience and mitigate the ongoing loss of productive human capital.

Beyond traditional agriculture, two key areas offer significant potential for regional transformation. One of them is culinary and Rural Tourism, which is identified as a "high-potential" but underutilized resource. Establishing a "culinary map" of Bulgaria—identifying 33 distinct regions—could help preserve local identity while providing new sources of income and employment for rural residents (Патарчанова and Патарчанов, 2018). The other area is institutional revitalization. The local cultural centers possess the potential to evolve into community institutions that provide general education and vocational training, such as computer skills, helping to offset the closure of traditional schools (Patarchanov, 2006). Furthermore, strengthening the administrative capacity of local authorities to successfully secure and implement European grant projects is vital for reversing the current stagnation observed in peripheral rural zones (Petrov and Borisov, 2024). Equally, the implementation of "smart village" concepts, which leverage artificial intelligence and advanced data analytics, could significantly enhance agricultural productivity while simultaneously improving regional energy efficiency through the adoption of integrated renewable energy management systems.

Ultimately, ensuring long-term sustainability requires a robust mechanism that aligns the development of the agricultural and forestry sectors with the specific needs of villages as functional territorial units. Establishing this closer link between sector-specific growth and local settlement structure is critical for reducing existing disparities in living standards between rural municipalities and urban centers. Furthermore, prioritizing the bioeconomy by incentivizing the production of biomass fuels and renewable energy within these non-urbanized

territories presents a viable pathway for economic diversification (Yarkova, Stoykova and Markov, 2021).

There are also several practical measures suggested by Patarchanov (2010). Firstly, specialized legislation: Development of a package of special legislation and strategic planning documents exclusively for mountain areas. Secondly, contemporary mapping: Implementing geographical identification and mapping based on criteria that reflect real natural features and their direct impact on socio-economic processes. In addition, creating ordinances to subsidize small-scale mountain farmers (e.g., those raising only 1-2 cows) who are currently overlooked by market-economy-focused laws like the Law on Livestock (Patarchanov, 2010). This would preserve the livestock sector as both a livelihood and a "serious social factor. Moreover, encouraging branch associations and unions for joint marketing initiatives and cross-partnerships, particularly in the field of organic farming and products with protected designations of origin, such as mountain dairies and pastures. Furthermore, another measure can be the improvement of accessibility through specialized transport services and professional education networks tailored to the "knowledge economy" of mountain regions.

CONCLUSIONS

Sustainable development in Bulgaria's rural areas requires a shift from purely sectoral policies to integrated territorial management. This includes the creation of a National Network for Rural Development to coordinate between central and local authorities. Successful transformation depends on diversifying the rural economy into non-agrarian sectors and fostering "bottom-up" initiatives through continued support. The findings emphasize that future policy frameworks must shift from uniform sectorial support toward place-based, multi-sectoral interventions that incentivize local value-added production (Yarkova, Stoykova and Markov, 2021). Such a transition necessitates strengthening the collaborative capacity of sub-national actors to overcome the historical limitations of centralized, top-down policy delivery.

Finally, fostering long-term resilience requires integrating social infrastructure development with agricultural modernization to mitigate the regional disparities highlighted by current socio-economic trends (Beluhova-Uzunova and Hristov, 2020). By prioritizing subnational heterogeneity and the specific socioeconomic nuances of Bulgarian regions, policymakers can better align institutional support with the actual operational constraints of local farm enterprises. Additionally, the implementation of adaptive monitoring systems and the active inclusion of local communities in decision-making processes are essential to ensure that developmental strategies remain responsive to emerging regional challenges. Future efforts should prioritize the simplification of administrative procedures under the Common Agricultural Policy to unlock the untapped potential of diverse rural development measures. Strategic focus on fostering rural entrepreneurship, combined with targeted tax incentives for innovative investments, remains a vital mechanism for long-term demographic and economic stabilization (Petrov, 2025). Complementing these policy shifts, future research should incorporate longitudinal comparative studies of rural development across varying European contexts to validate the effectiveness of these multidimensional interventions.

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DEVELOPMENT OF TOURIST CIRCUITS IN THE CONTEXT OF FILM TOURISM: LITERATURE REVIEW

Luís Souza[1], Priscila Melo[2]

ABSTRACT: *The ongoing development of tourism points not only to improvements but also to innovations for enhancing the sector. In this context, the tourist circuit involved with film tourism presents a strong possibility for boosting tourism activity. Thus, the objective of this research is to investigate, through a review of the literature, which principles, characteristics, and strategies can contribute to the development of film tourism circuits. The method used was based on a search for scientific articles in online journals, guided by the selection of specific keywords to delimit the study. The results, in turn, categorically present the functionality of the tourist circuit within the scope of film tourism, as well as the identification of the agents involved. The study concludes with an overview of the theoretical and practical limitations of the research and recommendations for future studies.*

KEYWORDS: *tourist circuits, film tourism, film routes, tourist segmentation, tourist attractiveness.*

INTRODUCTION

The tourism phenomenon requires innovation so that the operations carried out in the sector continue to function effectively. Regarding this fact, Otero-Neira et al. (2009) state that it is possible to obtain innovative products in two ways: the first is through an unexpected creation, which will bring a sense of exclusivity to the product; the second, on the other hand, is related to the improvement of something that already exists, offering enhancements and new features.

It is evident that the tourism sector, due to its multidisciplinary nature, can offer numerous openings for new trends, among which the process of establishing a Tourist Circuit (TC) stands out to boost innovation in the sector. Besides being a means to foster integration among different sectors (private, public, and society), it can also result in the strengthening of the destination(s) by increasing their attractiveness to new tourists (Emmendoerfer et al., 2011).

According to Manhas, Kour, and Bhagata (2014), TCs help tourist destinations maintain a collaborative approach, whether through synergistic relationships among sector agents or by uniting two or more segments to create a circuit that encompasses distinct areas. These authors suggest that TCs can have different themes by exploring various fields of knowledge, which may result in a broader audience being included in the circuit.

From this perspective, the various segments of tourism can be designed for the population in the form of a tourist circuit. In turn, these segments can be used both to promote the circuit and be promoted by it, given that "it is necessary to constantly select and best serve different market segments in order to generate revenue" (Barbosa, 2024, p. 3). That is, the choice and proper usability of the segment can positively or negatively impact the tourism revenue of the destination.

Regarding the use of tourism segmentation within the scope of circuits, Campos-Rabadán (2020) discusses the film circuit as one of the potential possibilities to be developed. TCs promoted based on audiovisual productions (feature and short films) highlight the sector's diversity, as they bring to light an emerging segmentation category that is still being developed in tourism (Martin-Fuentes, 2020).

Therefore, the central objective of this article is to investigate, based on the literature, which principles, characteristics, and strategies can contribute to the development of film

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tourism circuits.

Following this introduction, the research methodology is outlined, as well as the definition of the method and the data collection process used. Subsequently, the research results lead to a discussion and conclusion, addressing the importance of circuits for the development of film tourism and presenting the study's possible theoretical implications.

METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as a literature review, which, according to Loureiro et al. (2024), is a writing method that enables the understanding of a particular subject over time by presenting different articles and authors who, although focusing on the same theme in their research, offer various approaches and perspectives to broaden the knowledge horizon on the topic. Furthermore, Leite et al. (2019) summarizes the literature review in three stages: (i) detailing the central objective of the research, (ii) determining whether it is linked to the objective and the method used, and (iii) assessing whether it simplifies the description of the results and the study's conclusion.

Thus, to conduct this research, it was necessary to search for digital journals, including Portal de Periódicos da CAPES, Elsevier, Scopus, Emerald Publishing, MDPI, among others. During the searches on their websites, keywords were used to standardize the selection of articles, with the main ones being 'tourism', 'movie' or 'film', 'circuit' or 'routes'. The intention was to map as many studies as possible that featured an interaction of at least three keywords simultaneously.

As this study is limited to addressing issues of tourist circuits within the context of film tourism, the lack of in-depth discussion of this specific topic in scientific articles became evident. Although research on the gradual growth of film tourism has expanded significantly over time (Barbosa, 2024), when combined with different complementary themes, such as tourist circuits, there is a noticeable decline in research. Therefore, it became necessary to draw on insights from content with different thematic bases for the development of the study.

RESULTS

In tourism, the terminology of the word 'circuit' can be a factor of variability depending on the region or on the meaning assigned to the expression at a given moment (Dam, 2016). In the literature, various actors address different terms with similar meanings. These include tourist circuits (Tomazzoni et al., 2024), tourist routes (Vada et al., 2022), tourist corridor (Huang et al., 2022; Hess and Fischer, 2001), and tourism cluster (Orlov & Kankhva, 2021; Sohn and Beni, 2023), which are among the most commonly and similarly used.

According to Dam (2016), a tourist circuit is established by an itinerary with at least three tourist attractions, which should not be very far apart from one another to facilitate tourists' movement. Moreover, this type of route tends to be planned to cater to different visitor profiles, although it may present segmentation according to the specific interests of the public. In this sense, the tourist circuit is also characterized by the construction of its own identity, which differentiates it from other experiences or tourism products (Queirós, 2017).

This situation may characterize the offer of several tourism products or services with complementary factors, possibly leading to a competitive advantage, since there is a greater margin for satisfying the consumer's needs (Oliveira & Santos, 2006).

Furthermore, tourist routes are presented as an alternative version to the circuit. On this topic, Leite et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of tourist routes for sector cooperation, given that distinct localities can work together to further boost the sector. Tourist routes represent the promotion of tourism activity through travel with interconnections among

destinations or attractions, encouraging tourists to become acquainted with various spots within a location (Vada et al., 2022).

The term "circuit" and its derivatives become relevant from the moment it is unlikely that a tourist will travel from their place of origin to a destination solely to visit one or two tourist attractions (Tavares, 2019). Additionally, Lemos et al. (2010, p. 272) state that "tourism activity is only sustained when the destination offers a certain degree of attractiveness to the tourist. " In other words, a manager in the tourism sector can measure the attractiveness of their destination by the number of attractions it offers.

Depending on the number and types of tourist attractions of a destination, there may be greater or lesser adherence to a tourist circuit since these attractions are the main elements that make the itinerary possible in the given location. This is because the attractions are viewed and projected as a differentiating offer—each destination will have a certain type of tourist attraction to reach a specific audience, and consequently, they contribute to the reconfiguration of the destination's identity (Sebrae – SP, 2016).

Considering the relevance of this concept for tourism planning and organization, it is pertinent to examine how the literature has addressed the notion of the tourist circuit. In this context, Table 1 presents studies dealing with this concept.

Table 1: Review of tourism circuit

Authors	Paper	Contribution of the study	Elements of the circuit identified in the paper
Dam (2016)	*Tourism Circuit Development in Peripheral Destinations: Case of Tripura, India*	Analyzes the development of a regional tourist circuit in Tripura (India), structured to integrate different cultural, religious, and natural attractions with the aim of strengthening tourism in peripheral destinations.	Integration of multiple attractions; regional organization of the tourist offer; territorial development strategy.
Firdausi & Anshu (2019)	*An Assessment of Tourism Structure and Superstructure in Buddhist Pilgrimage Circuit of Bihar*	Studies the Buddhist pilgrimage circuit in Bihar (India), analyzing the tourism infrastructure and superstructure associated with the religious destinations connected in the circuit.	Connection between religious destinations; tourism infrastructure; structured pilgrimage itinerary.
Asor, Catedrilla, De Leon & Ramos (2021)	*Implementation of Tourism Circuit Concept in an Android-Based Tourist Navigation Application*	Develops a tourist navigation application based on the circuit concept, connecting various tourist attractions as part of a single visitation experience.	Sequence of tourist attractions; integration of destinations; use of technology for circuit planning.
Kumar & Chandran (2025)	*A Study on the Role of Smart Tourism Tools in Advancing the Jharkhand Mining Tourism Circuit*	Analyzes the development of the mining tourism circuit in Jharkhand (India) and the hole of smart tourism tools in the management and promotion of the circuit.	Thematic circuit; regional integration; use of digital technologies in the tourist experience.

Source: Research data, 2026.

Thus, a tourist circuit is also defined as "a set of political-administrative municipalities possessing various spatially diverse tourist attractions, and generally located close to one another" (Tavares, 2019). For Santos (2004), the participation of multiple municipalities in a circuit should be analyzed from the perspective of their proximity, since this may concentrate on the unique features of each one, including the participation of small municipalities.

Therefore, the formation of circuits seeks to promote cooperation among different localities and actors in the tourism sector, strengthening regional governance and increasing the competitiveness of destinations through the articulation of resources, services, and joint promotional strategies (Guilarducci & Fratucci, 2020).

However, the literature also points out that from the perspective of planning and organizing the tourism offer, a circuit does not necessarily need to cover different municipalities. In certain situations, it can be structured within a single administrative territory, as long as there is integration among the attractions and tourism services, allowing visitors to circulate among different points of interest. In this sense, the organization of a circuit presupposes the articulation of tourism resources, infrastructure, and support services, composing a visitation system that enables an integrated experience of the destination (Santos et al., 2021).

Regardless of the term used—circuit, route, corridor, or cluster—it is important to understand that, like tourism itself, they are shaped through segmentation: the creation of a cultural route (Lin et al., 2024) and a historical heritage corridor (Huang et al., 2022; Tavares, 2019) expand cultural tourism; routes for rural tourism (Leite et al., 2023; Haulle et al., 2024) foster the development of this segment; circuits in religious sites (Sivanandham et al., 2025); circuits for the analysis of food and beverage services (Obonyo et al., 2013); circuits in protected or conservation areas (Okello & Yerian, 2009).

Thus, another potential strand to be integrated into tourist circuits is audiovisual. According to Leotta (2016), the use of cinematic maps containing real filming locations (settings) can enhance the consumer experience, since depending on their level of devotion to the work, viewers may experience emotional pleasures by contemplating a possible visit to the setting of their favorite film.

Audiovisual appears to be a great tool for cities, regions, and tourist destinations, as it increases the visibility of the locality using its settings as the backdrop in a film (Beeton, 2001). In this context, Méndiz Noguero (2011) introduces the term 'city placement' as the insertion of countries or cities in films, stating that this concept is biased toward a marketing strategy, in which both the work and the place benefit from the partnership.

By citing cities such as Barcelona, London, New York, and Paris, Martin-Fuentes et al. (2020) point out that few tourists would be motivated to visit them exclusively because of a single film. In this way, the authors argue that, in this situation, tourist routes should diversify their attractions based on a variety of works, making it possible to cater to a broader range of public preferences. This will result in a harmonious distribution of tourists and lead to longer stays.

Although mass tourists and a small fraction of film enthusiasts may not be interested in film location routes, whether due to lack of knowledge or other priorities, the presence of such routes in places connected to audiovisual works remains necessary, as they can evoke feelings in some visitors or serve as the main motivation for a tourist to visit the destination (Martin-Fuentes et al., 2020).

DISCUSSION

In tourism, circuits are conceived to stimulate the sector beyond the economy, designing a joint dynamization of the various existing agents for the sector's functionality (Tavares, 2019). Among the many possible combinations of circuits with tourism segments, the integration with film tourism stands out as a distinctive aspect for the market.

From this perspective, filming locations, landscapes used as sets, and cultural spaces connected to audiovisual production can be organized as tourist attractions integrated into a themed circuit.

The structuring of a film tourism circuit can be understood as a process that brings together principles of territorial tourism planning with the thematic and interpretive logic of tourist routes. In the field of tourism studies, routes and circuits are important tools for organizing the tourism offer and creating integrated visitation experiences. In this context, the development of film tourism circuits can be seen as an adaptation of these structures to the domain of audiovisual-related tourism.

The literature on tourism planning highlights that the consolidation of tourist circuits depends on territorial articulation and cooperation among different institutional actors. According to Mario Carlos Beni (2001), tourism should be analyzed as a system composed of various interdependent elements, including attractions, infrastructure, services, and organizations responsible for managing tourism activities. Thus, the organization of tourist circuits represents a territorial integration strategy capable of bringing together these different components.

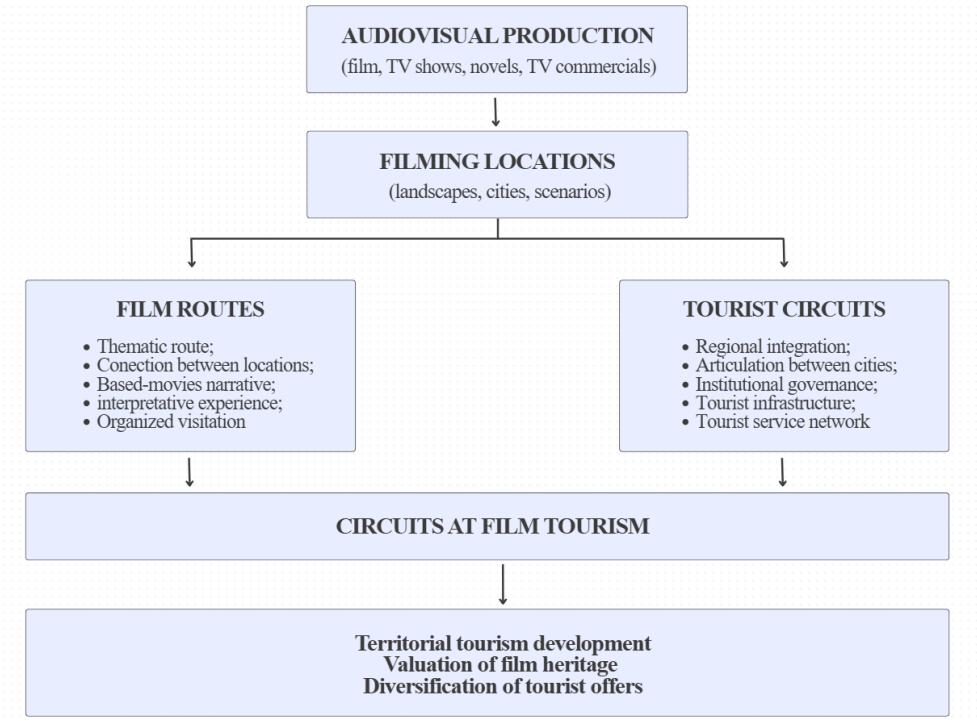
Applied to film tourism, this principle involves conceiving the circuit as a territorial network of destinations connected to audiovisual productions, bringing together locations that have served as settings for film or television productions. This structure involves cooperation between tourism agencies, cultural institutions, companies in the audiovisual sector, and organizations dedicated to attracting audiovisual productions. In this way, the film circuit ceases to be merely a visitation route and becomes a territorial arrangement for cultural appreciation and tourism development.

Thus, the structuring of film tourism circuits can be understood as a process that integrates territorial planning, thematic development, and promotional strategies, transforming audiovisual locations into tourism products capable of valuing cultural heritage and boosting tourism development in territories, as shown in Image 1.

The proposed model demonstrates that the film tourism circuit results from the integration of two tourism organization tools discussed in the literature: film routes and tourist circuits.

Initially, audiovisual productions bring visibility to certain areas by using filming locations that become recognized by the public. These spaces serve as the starting point for the development of film tourism, as they arouse visitors' interest in personally experiencing the settings related to audiovisual narratives.

Image 1: Flowchart of circuits in film tourism



Source: Research data, 2026.

From these locations, themed film routes can be structured, featuring itineraries that connect different points associated with audiovisual productions. These routes organize the tourism experience around a narrative axis, enabling visitors to interpretively travel through the settings of audiovisual works.

However, for these routes to become established as structured tourism products, their inclusion in a tourist circuit is necessary, understood as a territorial arrangement involving the integration of municipalities, tourism infrastructure, and regional governance mechanisms. In this context, the circuit provides the institutional and operational conditions required to manage tourism activities, including planning, promotion, and coordination among the various actors involved.

Thus, the film tourism circuit emerges from the combination of:

- The thematic organization of routes, which structures the visitor experience;
- and the territorial integration of circuits, which guarantees governance and infrastructure for the destination.

This articulation makes it possible to transform filming locations into organized tourism products, contributing to regional development, valuing audiovisual heritage, and diversifying the tourism offer.

CONCLUSIONS

The present research aimed to investigate, based on the literature, which principles, characteristics, and strategies can contribute to the development of film tourism circuits. To this end, a model was developed grounded in theoretical contributions from tourism planning, territorial organization of tourism, and studies on tourism motivated by audiovisual productions.

The literature review demonstrated that the development of film tourism circuits depends on the integration of different structural dimensions of tourism. Among the main elements identified, the territorial organization of the circuit stands out, involving the coordination between attractions, infrastructure, and tourism services. In this sense, tourism can be understood as a system composed of interdependent elements, whose integration is fundamental for the consolidation of structured tourism products, as argued by Mario Carlos Beni (2001).

The literature also highlights the importance of the thematic construction of the tourist experience, often organized through routes or interpretative itineraries. As emphasized by Margarita Barretto (2005), organizing routes based on a thematic axis helps to structure the visitor's experience and connect different attractions within a coherent narrative. In film tourism, this narrative axis is provided by audiovisual productions and filming locations.

Furthermore, studies indicate that many visitors are motivated to visit the places where movies and series were produced, seeking to experience the settings associated with the audiovisual narratives. In this context, enhancing filming locations as tourist attractions requires strategies for interpretation, signage, and cultural mediation, as discussed by Beeton (2005) and Roesch (2009).

Based on these elements, the model developed in this research made it possible to identify structuring principles for the development of film tourism circuits, including the territorial integration of attractions, institutional cooperation, thematic construction of the tourist experience, and the valorization of filming locations. The articulation of these factors helps transform audiovisual locations into structured tourism products, capable of promoting tourism development and valuing the cultural heritage associated with cinematic productions.

Regarding tourism circuits as means to develop film tourism, the literature presented indicated that this is still a work in progress; that is, there are gaps in both scientific research and practical application. Therefore, improvements are needed so that related actions can be effectively developed.

As an outcome of this research, it is proposed that future studies carry out an empirical analysis of the film tourism circuit associated with the film 'The Secret Agent', whose filming took place in the city of Recife. This phase of the investigation will seek to apply the conceptual model developed in this study to analyze the potential for structuring a cinematic tourism circuit based on the locations used during film production.

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SMART TOURISM DESTINATIONS: THE ROLE OF DATA INTELLIGENCE IN RECONFIGURING LOCAL TOURISM

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ABSTRACT: *This article analyzes the transition from traditional tourism to Smart Tourism Destinations (STDs), focusing on the role of data intelligence in reshaping local management and understanding how tourism has been shaped by the use of data intelligence. The aim is to analyze how data collection and processing can transform destination management. Through a literature review in the Scopus database, the research examines how technologies such as Big Data, AI, and IoT collect digital traces to personalize experiences and optimize strategic decisions. The results highlight four key areas: territorial monitoring, demand forecasting, collaborative governance, and sustainability. From these, it can be concluded that current competitiveness depends on the ability to transform data into territorial intelligence, balancing operational efficiency with the well-being of resident communities.*

KEYWORDS: *Smart Tourism Destinations; Data Intelligence, Destination Management; Smart Technologies; Tourism Data*

1 INTRODUCTION

For some time now, a new tourist profile has been emerging in various locations where tourism is a major activity. This modern tourist is, for the most part, more hyper-connected, a more frequent user of technological tools, with greater access to diverse information and, consequently, becoming more demanding and critical of what they are looking for in these locations and what those locations have to offer.

In response, destinations have undergone necessary changes regarding the use of these technologies and need to keep up with market transformations. It is in this context that so-called Smart Tourism Destinations (STDs) emerge, utilizing digital technologies with large volumes of data (big data, AI, IoT, social media, Geographic Information Systems, smart cards) to connect stakeholders, support decisions, and personalize experiences, going far beyond traditional destination management (Aguirre Montero & López-Sánchez, 2021). This has shaped the tourism experience through a much more personalized approach, based on a greater understanding of tourist profiles, made possible by the amount of data they generate. Every time tourists access information, make comments, or interact online, they generate a huge amount of data, leaving a so-called digital trail of their choices and preferences. Thus, the market has a great opportunity to personalize and interact more effectively with these tourists, improving their overall experience.

Data intelligence is reshaping tourism by personalizing the traveler experience and optimizing business management through AI (Artificial Intelligence) and big data analytics. Solutions such as dynamic pricing, 24/7 chatbots, precision marketing, and gamification increase competitiveness, reduce operational costs, and enhance customer satisfaction in real time (Sebrae, 2023). Since the rise of what is called the Experience Economy, the role of geographic locations on the global tourism map has been redefined. Therefore, in the current context, the competitiveness of a local destination no longer resides solely in its natural or historical assets, but also in its ability to transform so-called digital footprints into strategic intelligence.

The concept of Smart Tourism Destinations therefore emerges as a response to the need for more assertive public and private management, where Big Data acts as a tool for designing

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flows, services, and narratives. By converting raw data on mobility, consumption, and behavior into applied knowledge, local tourism ceases to be a sector of trial and error and becomes a planned ecosystem capable of balancing visitor satisfaction with the sustainability and well-being of resident communities. Therefore, it is worthwhile to understand the main problem of this research: How has tourism been reconfigured by the use of data intelligence?

It is believed that data intelligence democratizes access to the market, allowing local tourism to be designed with surgical precision, considering that intelligent platforms and recommendation systems analyze behavior, preferences, and context to offer personalized services, itineraries, and recommendations in real time, increasing satisfaction and loyalty (Suanpang & Pothipassa, 2024). Therefore, the main objective of this article is to analyze how data collection and processing has transformed the management of tourist destinations. Then, based on this analysis, it aims to identify whether it is possible to promote a strategic reconfiguration focused on the efficiency and competitiveness of the tourist experience.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1 Smart Tourism Destinations: From traditional tourism to a data-driven model

To understand the model that is currently being used by localities regarding the management and conduct of tourism, it is necessary to understand how this activity has been transforming, moving from so-called traditional tourism, which was based on the simple offering of natural/historical resources, to a data-driven tourism model.

Therefore, reflecting on the origins of the concept of Smart Tourism Destination (STD), it emerges from the convergence between the smart city paradigm and digital transformations in the tourism sector. Buhalis (2000) already stated that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been structurally redesigning the relationships between supply and demand in tourism since the 1990s, establishing the basis upon which the most advanced models of intelligent destination management would be developed.

Gretzel et al. (2015a) are a seminal reference in the theoretical delimitation of Smart Tourism. For these authors, smart tourism can be understood as the development of tourism supported by integrated efforts in a destination to collect and aggregate data generated by physical infrastructure, social connections, governmental/organizational and human sources, combined with the use of advanced technologies to transform this data into experiences and competitive value on-site. It is, therefore, a concept that goes beyond the simple digitization of services, implying a systemic architecture for capturing, processing, and valuing data for the benefit of tourists, businesses, and public managers.

Simultaneously, Hunter et al. (2015), argue that smart tourism is not simply an objective technical condition, but results from practices of meaning-making and collective construction of realities among multiple actors—tourists, local communities, businesses, and governments. This perspective broadens the conceptual scope: the intelligence of a destination is not measured solely by its technological infrastructure, but by the capacity of its actors to co-create value and meaning from the available data and experiences.

In this context, and contemporaneously with the previous discussions, the smart tourist destination conceptually emerges as an innovative tourist destination, built upon a state-of-the-art technological infrastructure that guarantees the sustainable development of tourist areas, accessible to all, facilitating the interaction and integration of the visitor with the environment, increasing the quality of the experience at the destination and improving the quality of life of residents (López de Ávila, 2015). Thus, Gretzel et al. (2015b) consolidate the understanding that the smart tourist destination would be conceived by applying the principles of smart cities to tourist territories, considering both residents and tourists, focusing on mobility,

sustainability, and quality of life/visit. The central element is the integration of ICTs into the physical infrastructure.

Mehraliyev et al. (2020), in a systematic review of the state of the art of Smart Tourism, identify the main enabling technologies present in the literature, organizing them into three major sets: (1) data collection and generation technologies — Internet of Things (IoT), urban sensors, mobile devices, and geolocation systems; (2) processing and analysis technologies — big data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and data mining; and (3) delivery and interface technologies — augmented reality, virtual reality, intelligent assistants, chatbots, and co-creation platforms. The authors note that studies published up to 2020 focused mainly on the first two categories, with a significant gap in research on technology-mediated delivery and experience.

The technological infrastructure of Smart Tourism Destinations rests on an articulated set of enabling technologies identified in the literature (Mehraliyev et al., 2020; Buhalis, 2019; Buhalis et al., 2023). The Internet of Things (IoT) forms the base layer of this system, enabling the operation of urban sensors, the tracking of tourist flows, and real-time environmental monitoring. The data generated by this infrastructure, as well as that produced by tourists and digital platforms, is processed through Big Data Analytics, a technology responsible for processing large volumes of information and transforming this data into resources for destination management.

Based on this analytical framework, Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning operate enabling the personalization of experiences, demand forecasting, and dynamic price management. Coordination between the different actors in the destination is facilitated by collaborative digital platforms, which integrate public and private stakeholders in ecosystems oriented towards the creation of shared value. Complementarily, Destination Management Systems (DMS) are responsible for integrating tourism information for planning and distribution purposes, functioning as the informational backbone of the smart tourist destination.

In terms of visitor experience, Augmented and Virtual Reality, for example, enrich the tourist journey in its three phases (before, during, and after the visit), expanding the range of interactions between the tourist and the territory. Finally, cloud computing and 5G provide the necessary connectivity infrastructure for all these applications to operate in real time, ensuring the scalability and responsiveness that characterize a truly smart destination.

2.2 Data Ecosystem in Tourism and the Digital Reputation of Destinations

The advancement of digital technologies and online platforms has expanded the availability of data in the tourism sector, enabling the development of strategies based on data intelligence. In Smart Tourism Destinations, decision-making depends on the collection and integration of information from multiple sources, forming a complex and heterogeneous data ecosystem. This data can be used to improve decision-making processes, support marketing strategies, and develop more efficient and personalized tourism services (Celdrán-Bernabéu et al., 2026).

This ecosystem now includes internal data from destination management organizations, such as digital campaign metrics and social media interactions, as well as external data from booking platforms, search engines, mobility data, and location systems (Bakhtiari et al., 2025). Furthermore, the advancement of digital technologies and online platforms has also expanded the generation of behavioral data from tourists, stemming from the use of apps, social networks, and digital tourism information systems (Czyz & Javed, 2025).

Comments and reviews published on social media and travel platforms allow for the identification of visitor perceptions, expectations, and satisfaction levels. Data mining techniques can analyze large volumes of user-generated content (UGC) to identify behavioral patterns and guide improvements in tourism services, as evidenced in research conducted in the city of Shantou, China, which analyzed 7,952 tourist reviews from platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili, Ctrip, and Meituan to identify satisfaction, criticisms, and opportunities for improvement (Chen et al., 2025).

In this context, technologies such as the Internet of Things, urban sensors, and big data analytics systems allow for monitoring visitor flows, identifying behavioral patterns, and supporting strategic decisions in tourism planning (Alshiha et al., 2025).

An example of this process is the use of data-driven decision support systems for the strategic planning of destinations. Digital tools that integrate sustainability indicators and performance metrics allow managers to assess the economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism and define strategies more aligned with sustainable development goals. The European IMPACTOUR project, for example, implemented in 18 European destinations, developed a digital decision support system to guide the planning of sustainable cultural tourism (De la Cal et al., 2026).

It is therefore clear that the analysis of large volumes of data is carried out using artificial intelligence techniques and predictive models, capable of identifying trends, forecasting tourist demand and supporting the sustainable management of destinations (Kupi, 2025). In Smart Tourist Destinations, this data can come from interactions on social networks, public Wi-Fi systems, online booking platforms and search engines, enabling destination management organizations to better understand visitor behavior and guide marketing and tourism planning strategies.

One example is the case of Benidorm (Spain), where the destination management organization uses data from social networks, Google Trends, platforms such as Airbnb and Booking, and air connectivity information to monitor demand trends and guide strategic decisions for destination promotion and management (Bakhtiari et al., 2025). Thus, the integration between technological infrastructure, data analysis, and digital governance becomes a central element for the development of smart and competitive tourist destinations (Marinac et al., 2025).

Furthermore, with regard to digital reputation, it emerges as a strategic asset in the management of companies and tourist destinations, requiring increasing capacity for the collection and processing of digital data. Peco-Torres et al. (2023), demonstrate that the strategic management of online reputation, supported by the systematic collection of data and the capacity for organizational learning, produces positive consequences for both customer satisfaction and the financial performance of a hotel. Gabbard (2023) proves that online reviews directly impact financial indicators such as RevPAR (Revenue Per Available Room)[4], potentially increasing revenue per available room by up to 9% for each additional point in the average score.

Online reputation data transcends the scale of the individual company and can be applied to the territorial management of tourist destinations. Delgado, Martín and Gallego (2020), demonstrate that, using geostatistical techniques, indicators extracted from platforms such as Booking.com and TripAdvisor can be converted into continuous reputation surfaces, revealing territorial patterns that guide regional tourism planning.

[4]A hotel indicator that measures the revenue generated per available room, considering occupancy and rates.

These authors identify that the concentration of reviews around recognized attractions highlights the influence of geographic location on the digital visibility of accommodations, and that isolated rural establishments face structural asymmetry in the online reputation economy. This finding demonstrates that spatial analysis of digital data allows for the identification of visibility gaps and supports public policies for tourism promotion based on georeferenced evidence, transforming dispersed consumer data into territorial intelligence.

Online reputation has ceased to be a passive phenomenon and has become a manageable asset that requires data infrastructure, technological tools, and specific organizational skills, which can directly contribute to the management of tourism companies and destinations.

3 METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the main objective of this study, which is to analyze how data collection and processing has transformed the management of tourist destinations, a literature review was conducted to observe what current studies are showing about the use of data intelligence in tourism management. Consequently, data collection was carried out in the Scopus database, one of the largest databases of peer-reviewed scientific articles in the world, used by researchers in the areas of tourism and hospitality to obtain materials for bibliometric and scientific analyses (Severo et al., 2023; Quispe Fernández et al., 2024; Meneses Martins et al., 2025).

The search strategy adopted, using a combination of keywords related to smart tourism destinations and data intelligence in tourism, was: "smart tourism destination" AND "data intelligence" OR "data-driven" AND "tourism management". The application of these strings initially resulted in 76 documents indexed in the chosen database. Subsequently, a temporal filter was applied considering the last three years (2023 to 2026), which reduced the set to 56 documents, used as an initial basis for the subsequent stages of analysis. This sample contains 30 scientific articles, 14 works published in conference proceedings, 6 book chapters, 2 review articles, 2 conference reviews, and 2 books.

It is worth noting that book chapters, review articles, conference reviews, and books were excluded because they have editorial characteristics distinct from scientific articles. These types of documents have different evaluation processes, structures, and indexing criteria, which could compromise the comparability of the results. Thus, it was decided to keep only scientific articles and papers published in conference proceedings, which have greater methodological standardization and are more widely used in bibliometric analyses and literature reviews, totaling 44 studies.

Next, the full texts were accessed and read. Of these, 33 documents were successfully obtained and downloaded for full analysis. The remaining 11 documents could not be accessed in full text, even after an attempt at institutional access through the CAPES Periodicals Internet Portal, via CAFe (Federated Academic Community). Therefore, the final sample considered for analysis consisted of 33 documents available in full text.

A detailed reading of the article abstracts allowed for a more in-depth assessment of each study's adherence to the research objectives. At this stage, 8 articles were excluded for not presenting a direct contribution to the investigated theme, resulting in a final sample of 25 articles submitted to systematic analysis (Table 1).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 25 studies analyzed converge around four main thematic axes: (1) data collection and processing for territorial management; (2) application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in demand forecasting and experience personalization; (3) collaborative data governance; and (4)

integration between technology, sustainability and destination competitiveness.

Regarding the collection and monitoring of real-time data, the literature shows that sensors, IoT devices, and tourism applications constitute the primary layer of data generation in smart destinations. Sangkakorn et al. (2025) and Aliyah et al. (2023) demonstrate that this continuous data collection infrastructure enables dynamic destination monitoring, providing support for immediate operational responses. Li et al. (2024) expand this perspective by integrating tourist traffic, weather, and security data into visualization systems that support comprehensive territorial management. Along the same lines, Celdran-Bernabeu et al. (2026) and Bakhtiari et al. (2025) investigate the challenges and opportunities associated with the opening and sharing of this data produced by smart tourism destinations, demonstrating that institutional and organizational barriers to the publication of open data constitute the main obstacle to the full realization of the informational potential of smart destinations.

The processing of large volumes of data through big data analytics and machine learning techniques is identified as a central driver of transformation in tourism management. Rumangkit et al. (2025), Zhang and Cheng (2024), and Vidal-Gil (2024), converge in demonstrating that analytical platforms based on big data improve management efficiency, support sustainable planning, and inform strategic decisions based on data from social networks, digital platforms, and mobility systems. Ordóñez-Martínez et al. (2024) advance this perspective by proposing Tourism Data Spaces (structured spaces of open and interoperable data) as a strategic infrastructure for collective decision-making in destinations, while Garbani-Nerini et al. (2024) emphasize that data sharing between organizations is a necessary condition for building governance models and collaborative destination management.

Artificial Intelligence emerges in the literature as a cross-cutting and dynamic technology in the field of destination management. Alshiha et al. (2025), Giménez-Manuel et al. (2024), and Budic et al. (2025) demonstrate that AI algorithms applied to tourist behavior data, platforms such as Airbnb, and social networks allow for accurate demand and occupancy forecasts, service personalization, and improved management decisions. Kupi (2025) integrates this predictive capacity with an environmental dimension that, based on historical overnight stay series, projects demand volumes and estimates impacts on CO_2 emissions, water consumption, and waste generation, positioning AI as a tool for sustainable planning and proactive management of destination carrying capacity. Bingol and Yang (2025) propose a systemic model for smart destination management that articulates technologies and AI in destination ecosystems, demonstrating that management transformation depends on the integration between Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), transportation departments, and technology offices.

The processing of User-Generated Content (UGC) as a source of intelligence for destination management is explored by Chen et al. (2025), who propose a framework applied to reviews collected on Chinese digital platforms. The model achieves 92.3% accuracy in sentiment classification, revealing that 72.5% of reviews are positive, concentrated on gastronomic culture and natural landscapes; while 22.5% are negative, centered on congestion and over-commercialization. These findings illustrate how large-scale automated UGC analysis produces actionable intelligence for experience management and destination marketing strategies, directly connecting to the perspective of Czyz and Javed (2025), whose study confirms that the attributes of Smart Tourism Technologies (information, accessibility, interactivity, personalization, and security) positively impact experiential satisfaction and the sustainable image of the destination.

The dimension of governance and data-driven public policies runs transversally through the reviewed literature. Caamaño-Franco et al. (2024) and Ivars-Baidal et al. (2023) demonstrate that tourism observatories and urban planning data systems support the formulation of more effective public policies and the monitoring of strategic indicators. Palomo Santiago and Parra López (2024), in turn, highlight the significant growth of scientific production on technology and data-based management, signaling the maturation of the field. Gawlik et al. (2026) argue that the effective use of AI in urban tourism requires collaborative co-governance structures, referenced in the Quadruple Helix model, ethical oversight, and active civic engagement, and that tools such as real-time crowd monitoring and participatory platforms contribute directly to the development of destinations. Perkumiene et al. (2025) reveal that the capacity to adopt AI for environmental management in forest tourism destinations is deeply conditioned by the institutional context of each country, highlighting asymmetries that reinforce the need for approaches adapted to local realities.

Finally, the dynamic competitiveness of destinations as an object of data-driven analysis is addressed by Marinac et al. (2025), who mobilize territorial and tourism supply indicators for comparative analysis, and by Zhang and Deng (2024), who integrate environmental and tourism monitoring data into sustainable management models. Buhalis et al. (2023) synthesize this perspective by demonstrating that the integration of big data, sensors, and digital platforms in tourism ecosystems constitutes the basis upon which contemporary STDs are built - territorial systems in which intelligence emerges not from isolated technologies, but from the quality of the connections established between data, organizations, and actors.

Taken together, the findings of the reviewed articles indicate that the transformation of tourism destination management through data and smart technologies is underway in a broad and geographically diverse way, but is still marked by institutional asymmetries, gaps in information governance, and challenges in integrating operational efficiency, environmental sustainability, and social equity. The consolidation of Smart Tourism Destinations as the hegemonic model for territorial tourism management will therefore depend not only on technological advancement, but also on the capacity of destinations to build open, collaborative, and ethically oriented data architectures.

Table 1 - Data that transforms the management of tourist destinations.

Reference	Data used	Contribution to destination management
Marinac et al. (2025)	Territorial indicators and tourism supply data	They support competitiveness analysis and destination planning.
Alshiha et al. (2025)	Tourist behavior	AI analyzes preferences, improving management.
Rumangkit et al. (2025)	Digital platforms and big data	Smart technologies improve the efficiency of tourism management.
Sangkakorn et al. (2026)	Sensors, IoT, and tourism applications	Real-time destination monitoring
Caamaño-Franco et al. (2024)	Tourism statistics and indicators	Tourism observatories support strategic planning.
Giménez-Manuel et al. (2024)	*Airbnb* and social media data	AI enables forecasting of tourist demand and occupancy.
Zhang & Cheng (2024)	Big data tourism	Support for sustainable planning and management.
Zhang & Deng (2024)	Environmental data and tourism monitoring	Data-driven sustainable management
Garbani-Nerini et al. (2024)	Data shared between organizations	Governance and collaborative destination management
Ordóñez-Martínez et al. (2024)	Big data and open data for tourism	Tourism Data Spaces support strategic decisions.

Budic et al. (2025)	Data on reservations and tourist behavior	AI enables demand forecasting and personalization.
Vidal-Gil et al. (2024)	Social networks, platforms and mobile data	Analytics platforms support management decisions.
Li et al. (2024)	Data on tourist traffic, weather and safety.	Monitoring and visualizing destination data.
Palomo Santiago & Parra López (2024)	Scientific and technological data on smart destinations	They highlight the growth of technology and data-driven management.
Aliyah et al. (2023)	Data from IoT sensors and AI systems	Real-time data collection for tourism management.
Ivars-Baidal et al. (2023)	Urban planning and tourism data	They support data-driven governance and public policies.
Buhalis et al. (2023)	*Big data*, sensors, digital platforms	Data integration in the tourism ecosystem
Celdran-Bernabeu et al. (2026)	Open data from sensors, conversational agents and STD applications from Valencia (Spain)	They identify barriers and opportunities for the open publication of data in smart destinations.
Chen et al. (2026)	User-Generated Content (UGC), specifically User Reviews.	They offer a methodological *framework* for sentiment analysis to optimize tourism services and destination marketing strategies.
Gawlik et al. (2026)	Secondary data from AI initiatives and tourism management	They demonstrate that collaborative governance (Quadruple Helix), ethical AI oversight, and civic engagement are useful for destinations to use AI effectively and sustainably.
Perkumiene et al. (2025)	Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews	They reveal asymmetries in the adoption of AI in forest tourism areas.
Bingol & Yang (2025)	Primary data (interviews with managers) and secondary data (AI and technology initiatives published by DMOs).	They propose a smart destination management model based on the integration of technologies and AI to build destination ecosystems.
Bakhtiari et al. (2025)	Management and governance data	They examine barriers and opportunities in STD data management processes.
Kupi (2025)	Historical data on tourism demand, time series of overnight stays, environmental impact conversion factors.	They present an AI-powered demand forecasting model integrated with an environmental impact assessment module.
Czyz & Javed (2025)	Primary survey data	They confirm that attributes of Smart Tourism Technologies (information, accessibility, interactivity, personalization, and security) positively impact the tourist experience and the sustainable image of the destination, connecting technological adoption to territorial competitiveness.

5 CONCLUSION

This analysis of tourism destination management reveals a growing structural trend of incorporating data and smart technologies into planning, monitoring, and decision-making processes in destinations. The literature reviewed consistently demonstrates that the transition to data-driven models does not represent a break with the essence of tourism, but rather an enhancement of it. Data intelligence does not aim to replace human hospitality, an irreplaceable and constitutive dimension of the tourist experience, but to qualify it, providing localities with more precise, timely, and actionable information so that their management decisions are more assertive, sustainable, and aligned with the specificities of the territory.

In this sense, one of the most relevant findings of this review lies in the understanding

that the design of local tourism must be dynamic and continuously fed back by real-time data. More than operational efficiency, the intelligent use of data can act as a mechanism to protect the cultural identity of destinations, preventing the standardization imposed by global platforms from emptying local singularities and making tourism generic and interchangeable. Destinations that use their data to deeply understand who visits them, why they visit them, and how that visitation affects the host community are better equipped to make decisions that balance economic growth, resident well-being, and the preservation of cultural and environmental heritage.

The central finding of this research, however, is the observation that smart tourism destinations are still in an active process of construction and experimentation. Advances are significant, especially in the fields of artificial intelligence, predictive demand analysis, processing of user-generated content, and personalization of experiences, but these coexist with persistent gaps that limit the full potential of this paradigm. Data governance, equity in access to technologies, and the effective integration of the technological, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability remain critical challenges that are insufficiently addressed in the literature and, above all, in the practice of destination management.

This study does not seek to exhaust the subject; rather, it aims to emphasize the importance of local management focusing on adapting their destinations. By leveraging existing data, localities can gain a competitive advantage while transitioning from traditional models of tourism provision toward more modern and adaptive approaches. What the analyzed studies indicate, as a whole, is that the competitiveness of destinations in the contemporary scenario depends less and less on isolated tangible resources and more and more on the ability to build open, collaborative, and ethically oriented data architectures, capable of transforming information into territorial intelligence and territorial intelligence into quality of life for residents and quality of experience for visitors. Therefore, it is suggested that this debate be broadened by observing the use of new technologies by the tourism industry, further improving the data analysis capacity of the smart tourist destinations.

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BRAZILIAN AUDIOVISUAL POLICIES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH FILM-INDUCED TOURISM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE HIGHEST GROSSING PRODUCTIONS BETWEEN 2001 AND 2021

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ABSTRACT: *The audiovisual sector plays an important role in the creative economy and in disseminating images and narratives that enhance the visibility of territories. Film and television productions can influence public perceptions of places, contributing to territorial promotion and to the development of film tourism, understood as the visitation of locations used as settings for audiovisual productions. In Brazil, the strengthening of audiovisual production occurred mainly after the creation of the National Cinema Agency (ANCINE), responsible for regulating, supervising, and promoting the sector. In this context, this research analyzes the relationship between Brazilian audiovisual public policies and the development of the most viewed film productions between 2001 and 2021, considering their implications for territorial visibility and the potential development of film tourism. Documentary research was conducted using secondary data from ANCINE and the Brazilian Observatory of Cinema and Audiovisual (OCA). A total of 1,968 audiovisual productions were initially identified. Using five-year temporal segmentation, productions concentrating up to 50% of the total audience in each period were selected, resulting in a sample of 42 productions. Variables such as release year, genre, audience, box office revenue, and filming locations were analyzed. Results show a predominance of the Southeast region, especially Rio de Janeiro, while productions in other regions also contribute to expanding territorial visibility and reinforcing the potential of audiovisual works for film tourism development.*

KEYWORDS: *Audiovisual; políticas culturais; turismo cinematográfico; ANCINE.*

INTRODUCTION

The audiovisual sector has consolidated itself as one of the segments of the creative economy, encompassing activities related to the production, distribution, and exhibition of cinematic and television content. In addition to its cultural and economic role, audiovisual productions also influence the circulation of images and narratives about destinations, contributing to the construction of symbolic representations of different places.

In this context, the phenomenon of film-induced tourism stands out, characterized by visits to locations that have served as settings for audiovisual productions, such as films, series, and television programs. The exposure of landscapes, cities, and cultural elements through these productions can arouse the public's interest in visiting the places portrayed in the works, contributing to the promotion of tourist destinations and to the appreciation of these locations (Beeton, 2005). Thus, audiovisual productions can influence the public's perception of certain destinations, strengthening the tourist image of locations and stimulating visitor flows. Therefore, the audiovisual sector can act as an important instrument for territorial promotion, especially when associated with tourism planning strategies and cultural policies aimed at regional development.

In Brazil, the development of the audiovisual sector is directly related to the implementation of public policies aimed at regulating and fostering film production. An important milestone in this process was the creation of the Agência Nacional do Cinema (ANCINE) in the early 2000s, responsible for structuring mechanisms for financing, incentives, and monitoring Brazilian audiovisual productions.

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With the consolidation of these institutional instruments, an increase in the number of national audiovisual productions and an expansion of the presence of Brazilian films in the commercial cinema circuit can be observed. In this context, the objective of this research is to analyze the relationship between audiovisual public policies in Brazil and the development of the most-watched film productions between 2001 and 2021, considering their implications for territorial visibility and the potential development of film-induced tourism.

METHODOLOGY

This research is characterized as exploratory and descriptive, adopting both qualitative and quantitative approaches, seeking to understand the relationship between public audiovisual policies in Brazil, national film production, and their possible implications for film-induced tourism. Regarding the methodological procedures, the study is based on documentary research, using information made available by the Brazilian National Cinema Agency (ANCINE) and the Brazilian Observatory of Cinema and Audiovisual (OCA). Concerning its objectives, the investigation aims to understand the dynamics of audiovisual productions in Brazil and to describe their main characteristics, discussing their possible implications for film-induced tourism.

Initially, a search was conducted on the ANCINE website with the aim of identifying productions that were part of the commercial cinema circuit in Brazil. For this research, it was decided to consider only feature-length audiovisual productions exhibited in movie theaters, due to the greater availability and consistency of statistical data presented in the official reports provided by ANCINE and the Brazilian Observatory of Cinema and Audiovisual (OCA). The period between 2001 and 2021 was considered, a temporal cut defined based on the creation of ANCINE in the year 2000. The consulted reports provide systematized information about the performance of works in the commercial circuit, including data such as year of release, production title, director, genre, production company, distributor, number of screening rooms, audience reached, and box office revenue. From this initial survey, 1,968 audiovisual productions registered during the period were identified, including 1,233 feature films, 703 documentaries, 31 animations, and 1 musical.

For the analysis of the productions, a temporal cut in five-year intervals was adopted. The fragmentation of the analysis period is related to the socioeconomic, political, and technological transformations that influence both the production and circulation of audiovisual works over time. Thus, it is understood that films produced in different contexts require contextualized analyses. It should be noted that the years 2022 and 2023 were not considered due to the absence of consolidated data available on the ANCINE website at the time of data collection. The selection of the analyzed works considered Brazilian cinematographic productions with the largest audiences in movie theaters during the period, based on data provided by ANCINE. From this set of films, three main aspects were analyzed: (I) the political and institutional context associated with the production period of the works; (II) the evolution of public audiovisual policies across different governments; and (III) the territorial distribution of filming locations used in the cinematographic productions.

The analysis of these dimensions sought to understand how public policies contributed to strengthening Brazilian audiovisual production and how cinematographic productions may influence the visibility of certain territories. In this context, the study also considers the literature on film-induced tourism, a phenomenon in which audiovisual productions may influence public perception and interest in destinations portrayed in film narratives (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006).

The final sample consisted of 42 audiovisual productions distributed across the analyzed periods. A greater concentration of productions was observed between 2011 and 2015, with 16 selected works. In the other periods, 10 productions were identified between 2001 and 2005, 8 between 2006 and 2010, 6 between 2016 and 2020, and 2 productions in the year 2021.

For the analysis of the selected productions, information available in the ANCINE and OCA databases was used, including year of release, title of the work, maximum number of screening rooms, audience reached, and box office revenue. Based on these data, the productions responsible for the highest audience concentration in each analyzed period were identified, considering those that together represented approximately up to 50% of the total audience recorded in movie theaters.

In the period from 2001 to 2005, productions such as 2 Filhos de Francisco: A História de Zezé Di Camargo e Luciano, Carandiru, and Cidade de Deus stood out, concentrating a significant portion of the audience in movie theaters. Between 2006 and 2010, the largest audiences were recorded by films such as Tropa de Elite 2, Se Eu Fosse Você 2, and Nosso Lar. Between 2011 and 2015, there is a predominance of Brazilian comedies with broad commercial reach, such as De Pernas Pro Ar 2, Minha Mãe é uma Peça, and Até que a Sorte nos Separe.

In the period from 2016 to 2020, productions that achieved expressive audience numbers stand out, such as Nada a Perder, Os Dez Mandamentos, and Minha Mãe é uma Peça 3. Finally, in 2021, productions such as Marighella and Turma da Mônica: Lições were identified, a period marked by the reduction of audiences in movie theaters due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. These data served as the basis for analyzing the dynamics of Brazilian audiovisual production and its possible implications for territorial visibility and film-induced tourism.

RESULTS

Brazilian cinema began to develop at the end of the nineteenth century, and the first cinematographic manifestations in the country took place in 1896 in the city of Rio de Janeiro, accompanying the global expansion of this new artistic and technological form of expression (Bernardet & Ramos, 2017). However, it was only in the following decades that productions emerged seeking to represent elements of Brazilian history and culture, including adaptations of nineteenth-century novels and narratives related to the historical formation of the country (Bernardet & Ramos, 2017).

During the government of Getúlio Vargas, between the 1930s and 1940s, the Brazilian state began to play a more active role in the use of cinema as an educational and cultural instrument. In this context, the Instituto Nacional de Cinema Educativo (INCE) was created in 1936 and linked to the Ministry of Education and Health. The institute aimed to produce and edit educational films as well as document cultural and artistic aspects of the country (Barbosa, 2013). The creation of INCE was aligned with the educational proposals of the Escola Nova movement, which advocated the use of communication media, such as radio and cinema, as pedagogical instruments capable of contributing to the modernization of Brazilian society (Silva, 2007).

Until the late 1960s, many Brazilian film productions addressed historical themes and sought to represent events considered fundamental to the formation of national identity. Narratives related to independence, the abolition of slavery, and historical figures were frequently portrayed in productions of the period, often through a romanticized approach aligned with the predominant political and ideological interests of that context (Bernardet & Ramos, 2017).

Over time, however, cinema ceased to be used primarily as an educational instrument and gradually consolidated itself as an artistic and cultural manifestation. In this process, the Instituto Nacional de Cinema Educativo was transformed into the Instituto Nacional do Cinema (INC), which began to perform functions related to the development of the film industry in the country (Carvalhal, 2009). Among its responsibilities were the encouragement of national production, the regulation of the audiovisual sector, and the formulation of policies aimed at the development of the national film industry (Barbosa, 2013).

Subsequently, the strengthening of public policies directed at cinema led to the creation of other institutions and mechanisms supporting audiovisual production, including Embrafilme. This institution played an important role in the financing, distribution, and promotion of national cinema, contributing to the strengthening of Brazilian film production over several decades. In addition, other organizations, such as the Conselho Nacional de Cinema (Concine) and the Fundação do Cinema Brasileiro, also performed relevant functions in the regulation, promotion, and preservation of audiovisual production in the country (Simis & Pellegrini, 1998).

However, political and economic changes that occurred in Brazil in the early 1990s resulted in the extinction of several institutions linked to the cultural sector. During the government of Fernando Collor de Mello, Embrafilme, Concine, and other organizations were dismantled, causing a significant decline in national film production (Simis & Pellegrini, 1998). This process directly affected the Brazilian audiovisual sector, which underwent a period of crisis and restructuring.

Despite these difficulties, Brazilian cinema later experienced a process of institutional reorganization and recovery of production, driven by the creation of new incentive mechanisms and public policies aimed at the development of the audiovisual industry. This process contributed to expanding the production of national films and strengthening the presence of Brazilian cinema once again within the cultural and economic landscape of the country.

In this contemporary scenario of expansion in audiovisual production, the coexistence of different models of production and circulation of cinematographic works can also be observed. Independent productions, generally developed with more limited resources and less commercial orientation, face greater difficulties in accessing traditional distribution and exhibition circuits. As a result, many of these films find their main spaces of visibility and circulation in film festivals, both national and international. These events play a relevant role in the dissemination of authorial and experimental works, enabling productions with lower insertion in the commercial market to achieve critical recognition and reach specialized audiences.

In contrast, productions carried out by large companies in the audiovisual sector, often associated with national and international co-productions, have greater availability of financial and structural resources. These investments allow the adoption of broader promotional strategies aimed at securing space in the film market and, more recently, within the growing universe of digital streaming platforms. In this context, a reconfiguration of audiovisual distribution strategies can be observed, in which traditional cinema begins to coexist with new forms of circulation and consumption of audiovisual content.

From this historical trajectory, it can be observed that the development of cinema in Brazil has been directly related to institutional, technological, and cultural transformations that have shaped the country's audiovisual industry. The expansion of public policies, the reorganization of the sector, and the growth of audiovisual production have contributed to strengthening Brazilian audiovisual production and expanding its circulation across different spaces and platforms.

In this context, film productions begin to play not only a cultural and artistic role, but also an economic and territorial one, since films can influence the perception of places, stimulate interest in certain destinations, and contribute to the valorization of landscapes and cultural heritage presented in their narratives. Thus, the strengthening of the audiovisual industry creates favorable conditions for the articulation between cinema and tourism, especially with regard to the potential of audiovisual productions to promote destinations and stimulate tourist flows associated with filming locations.

When establishing a relationship with film-induced tourism, it can be observed that in 2006 the first initiatives related to this field emerged in Brazil. This movement was evidenced by the development of the booklet Tourism and Cinema, prepared with the support of the Brazilian Ministry of Tourism, although still without direct articulation with the Agência Nacional do Cinema (ANCINE). At that moment, there was only an initial perception of the tourism potential associated with audiovisual productions. However, in the following year, a study analyzing the synergy between the audiovisual and tourism sectors was conducted, highlighting the need for greater integration between these areas in order to strengthen and develop film-induced tourism in the country.

DISCUSSION

From 2001 to 2005, among the 10 audiovisual productions analyzed, 7 were produced in the Southeast region, with 6 taking place in the state of Rio de Janeiro and 1 in the state of São Paulo. This preference may be related to the wide availability of equipment for rental, the presence of major production companies, a diverse pool of actors, and several other attractive factors. However, the audiovisual production that reached the largest audience was filmed in the Central-West region, in the state of Goiás, with the film "2 Filhos de Francisco: A História de Zezé Di Camargo e Luciano."

On the other hand, in the Northeast region, the films "Lisbela e o Prisioneiro," filmed in Pernambuco, and "Maria, Mãe do Filho de Deus," whose filming took place in several cities in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, deserve special mention.

The period under analysis corresponds to the administration of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002) and part of the administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2011), during which the National Cinema Agency (ANCINE) was established in 2001. This initiative aimed to address the challenges faced by the audiovisual sector, which at that time was undergoing a process of recovery and facing difficulties related to its funding model (BARBOSA, 2013). Therefore, ANCINE was created by the first government with the objective of functioning as a development, regulatory, and supervisory agency for the audiovisual sector, in order to increase competitiveness in production, distribution, and exhibition. It thus assumed the role of a managing body responsible for collecting and allocating public resources aimed at investment in the audiovisual market (FORNAZARI, 2006).

Under the leadership of the second president, in 2003, an expansion of audiovisual productions can be observed due to the emphasis on public policies directed toward the audiovisual sector, now also including television and the internet. Consequently, an anthropological approach to cultural preservation and attempts to democratize access to funding became distinctive features of this period. As a result of this development, a significant increase in cinema audiences was observed, with the year 2005 representing a notable example through the film "2 Filhos de Francisco," which attracted an audience of 5,319,677 people to movie theaters.

Between 2006 and 2010, eight audiovisual productions were produced and released, with the particularity that all of them were filmed in Rio de Janeiro. The highlight in terms of audience during this period was the film "Tropa de Elite 2" (2010), which attracted 11,146,723 spectators in movie theaters and included scenes filmed in the Vidigal Favela in Rio de Janeiro. It was followed by the production "Se Eu Fosse Você 2," released in 2009, which reached an audience of 5,787,244 spectators.

A more focused analysis of this period reveals that by allowing the private sector to decide where and how to invest its capital, space was opened for private involvement in Brazilian culture, as pointed out by Nascimento (2007). This led to an emphasis on cultural marketing, in which private capital began to finance large audiovisual productions that would naturally attract larger audiences. As a consequence, cultural funding became primarily concentrated on large-scale productions, which frequently took place in the main capitals of the Southeast, particularly along the Rio–São Paulo axis, as observed by Pfeiffer (2008) and Nascimento (2007). It is also noteworthy that the State reassumed a significant role in the formulation of public policies beginning with the start of Lula's administration in 2003. During this period, Gilberto Gil (2003–2008) and Juca Ferreira (2008–2010) served as Ministers of Culture, highlighting the importance given to culture by the government.

Furthermore, Alves (2016) notes that at the end of 2010 the National Culture Plan (PNC) was presented, representing an essential instrument for the consolidation of long-term cultural policies. The PNC highlights the prominent role of the audiovisual sector in Brazilian culture and establishes it as a demand of both the government and society. Through specific goals, the Plan reinforces this importance, aiming, for example, by 2020, to include independent Brazilian audiovisual production in the programming of television channels (goal 44), as well as to increase the participation of national films in cinema ticket sales (goal 27), among other initiatives (BRAZIL, 2010).

Between 2011 and 2015, a total of 16 audiovisual productions were identified according to the criterion corresponding to 50% of the total audience. "De Pernas Pro Ar 2" emerged as the most popular film in movie theaters during this period, followed by the audiovisual production "Minha Mãe é uma Peça." It is important to note that most of these productions chose Rio de Janeiro as their main filming location, while Brasília, São Paulo, and Salvador also served as secondary settings. In addition to Brazilian territory, some of these productions extended their filming to locations such as Portugal, the United States (New York and Las Vegas), Morocco, and Italy. It is also relevant to highlight that all selected works belong to the comedy genre.

Although the period in question recorded a significant increase in the number of audiovisual productions collected, this phenomenon, within the scope of this research, is intrinsically linked to the number of spectators present in movie theaters, which appear numerically lower. Additionally, there is no clear evidence of any production that reached an audience exceeding five million spectators. Furthermore, the preference for filming in the state of Rio de Janeiro may be associated with the support provided by the Rio Film Commission, corroborating the fact that this state is one of the most sought-after destinations for audiovisual productions, both national and international. This is due to the presence of tax incentives, a wide availability of rental equipment, the presence of major production companies, a diversified pool of actors, and several other attractive factors.

This period coincided with the presidency of Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016) and was characterized by a lack of consensus regarding the need for a more effective approach in the field of culture in general, and in the audiovisual sector in particular. During this period, deviations in the direction of cultural policies were identified, perceived by cultural activists as

the beginning of a setback within the Ministry of Culture (MinC).

Between 2016 and 2020, six audiovisual productions were catalogued. The work "Nada a Perder," which portrays the journey of the evangelical bishop Edir Macedo businessman, founder and spiritual leader of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, as well as owner of Record TV recorded the largest audience in movie theaters during the analyzed period. It is important to emphasize that "Nada a Perder" is also the first film considered in this research to reach a total audience of 12,184,373 spectators.

The second most watched audiovisual production was the film "Os Dez Mandamentos," a cinematic adaptation based on the Bible and on the television soap opera of the same name produced by Rede Record, which stood out as one of the largest audience phenomena on Brazilian television in recent years. This work narrates one of the most iconic stories of the Bible: the trajectory of Moses. Notably, both productions belong to the religious genre and were produced by Record Filmes.

However, as reported by online news sources such as UOL, Veja São Paulo, O Globo, Terra.com, Gazeta do Povo, among others, these productions have raised questions regarding their popularity due to practices associated with the Universal Church. According to these sources, the church distributed free tickets to its followers as part of its promotional strategy for the audiovisual productions. This tactic aimed to increase the audience and consequently elevate the film's position as the most watched in Brazilian movie theaters. Nevertheless, a peculiar phenomenon occurred: although television news reported large crowds attending the screenings during the first week of release, subsequent weeks revealed theaters with empty seats, often with less than half of their capacity filled, which contradicts, in this case, the quantitative data related to ticket sales. This pattern of behavior was also observed in the case of the film "Os Dez Mandamentos."

From an economic and political perspective, this period involves three presidential administrations: Dilma Rousseff (2011 to 31/08/2016), Michel Temer (31/08/2016 to 2018), and Jair Bolsonaro (2019 to 2020). During Michel Temer's government, the National Cinema Agency (Ancine) underwent significant changes. Ancine directed investments toward the largest companies in the audiovisual sector, introducing the Audiovisual Sector Fund 2.0, which favored the previous commercial performance of proposing companies. During Jair Bolsonaro's administration, a liberal approach was adopted, seeking to reduce the structure of government, alongside a conservative approach that attempted to control the diversity of cultural themes, including criticism of LGBTQIA+ projects, as well as an interest in transferring Ancine's headquarters from Rio de Janeiro to Brasília, which ultimately did not occur. In summary, Ancine faced challenges in maintaining its autonomy as a state institution, preserving the technical structure of audiovisual policy amid political and ideological changes.

In 2021, the last year covered in the ANCINE report, only two audiovisual productions were identified: "Marighella," a film with political content, and "Turma da Mônica: Lições," aimed at a children's audience. It is important to note that this period was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have resulted in a decrease in cinema attendance.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the film industry, leading to the temporary closure of movie theaters, audience restrictions, and changes in entertainment consumption habits. This context may explain the reduction in the number of releases and in cinema audiences during the period analyzed.

Thus, based on the above, the list of films with the largest audiences in movie theaters is presented below (Table 1).

Table 1: List of films with the largest audiences in movie theaters

No.	Year	Title	Audience Size
1	**2018**	**Nothing to Lose**	**12.184.373**
2	**2016**	**The Ten Commandments**	**11.305.479**
3	2010	Elite Squad 2	11.146.723
4	**2019**	**My Mom Is a Character 3**	**10.978.012**
5	**2016**	**My Mom Is a Character 2**	**9.235.184**
6	**2019**	**Nothing to Lose 2**	**6.189.465**
7	2009	If I Were You 2	5.787.244
8	2005	2 Sons of Francisco: The Story of Zezé Di Camargo and Luciano	5.319.677
9	**2018**	**My Life on Mars**	**5.235.609**
10	2012	Upside Down 2	4.846.273

Source: *Prepared by the author, 2025.*

Based on the table above, it is evident that the period between 2016 and 2020 stood out for its remarkable audience representation in movie theaters. This occurred even amid the instabilities faced by the audiovisual sector due to political impasses, such as changes in government, strategic adjustments, and the possibility of the extinction of the National Cinema Agency (ANCINE). During this period, productions belonging mainly to the comedy and religious genres were released.

It is also relevant to emphasize that three of these productions were produced by Record Filmes (Nada a Perder; Os Dez Mandamentos; Nada a Perder 2), and these were developed without the participation of the sectoral fund, that is, without support from ANCINE. This period therefore stood out for its ability to attract audiences to movie theaters, despite the contingencies and uncertainties within the political and regulatory environment of Brazilian cinema.

CONCLUSIONS

The present research sought to answer the following question: how did the audiovisual public policies implemented in Brazil between 2001 and 2021, throughout different administrations, contribute to the development of national film production, and what are their possible implications for film-induced tourism?

The results indicate that the strengthening of the Brazilian audiovisual sector over the last two decades is directly associated with the implementation of public policies aimed at fostering audiovisual production. The institutional role of the National Cinema Agency (ANCINE), combined with the creation of financing mechanisms and incentives for production, significantly contributed to expanding the number of national productions and their presence within the exhibition circuit.

The analysis of the productions with the largest audiences also reveals that the growth of the audiovisual industry was accompanied by an expansion in the representation of different Brazilian territories in film narratives. By portraying landscapes, cities, and cultural elements, films contribute to the construction and dissemination of place images, increasing the visibility of certain destinations.

In this sense, the audiovisual sector can play a relevant role in territorial promotion, since audiovisual productions often stimulate public interest in the locations portrayed in the works, a phenomenon associated with so-called film-induced tourism. Therefore, audiovisual public policies, although primarily designed with cultural and economic objectives, may generate indirect impacts on the promotion and valorization of tourist destinations.

However, the analysis also reveals that this relationship still occurs in a relatively unstructured manner within Brazilian public policies. Throughout the analyzed period, governmental initiatives were mainly concentrated on strengthening the audiovisual production chain, without the development of a consistent articulation between cultural policies and tourism promotion strategies.

Thus, the research demonstrates that audiovisual public policies were fundamental for consolidating national film production, but it also highlights that the potential of cinema as a tool for tourism promotion remains underutilized in the Brazilian context, particularly due to the absence of integrated policies between the sectors of culture, audiovisual, and tourism.

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TOURISM AND BASIC SANITATION: AN ANALYSIS IN PIRENÓPOLIS, GOIÁS, BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT: *The expansion of tourism activity increases pressure on urban infrastructure, particularly on basic sanitation services, which are essential for the sustainability of tourist destinations. In this context, this study aims to analyze the role of basic sanitation in the development of tourism in the municipality of Pirenópolis, Goiás, Brazil. This is a bibliographic and documentary study with a qualitative approach and an exploratory and descriptive objective. Data collection was carried out through consultation of scientific articles, book chapters, and official documents available in digital databases and governmental sources. For the literature review, selection criteria were adopted, including a temporal scope between 2021 and 2025, the Portuguese language, open access, and peer review. The selected material was subjected to analytical reading and systematized through the preparation of analytical summaries. The results revealed a significant discrepancy in the municipality's basic sanitation services. Although the supply of treated water reaches approximately 99% of the population, there is no record of service provision through a sanitary sewage network. Furthermore, limitations in water access in rural areas and the disposal of solid waste in open dumps are observed. This scenario tends to intensify due to the growth in tourist flows and the seasonality associated with events and periods of higher visitation. It is concluded that basic sanitation is strategic for the consolidation of sustainable tourism in Pirenópolis, making investments in infrastructure and integrated planning essential to ensure the population's quality of life and the municipality's competitiveness as a tourist destination.*

KEYWORDS: *Tourism; Basic sanitation; Urban infrastructure; Regional development; Pirenópolis.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, as a force that shapes the economy, society, and culture, exerts a significant impact on the development of several regions around the world. Its capacity to generate revenue, create jobs, and promote culture and the environment makes this activity an important tool for advancement at local and regional levels (Vieira & Hoffmann, 2013).

However, for tourism to develop, components that support its promotion are required, among which the following stand out: infrastructure and basic services, such as transportation, banking services, health services, public security, sanitation, energy, and communication (Ignarra, 2001). In this context, basic sanitation emerges as an essential element for ensuring that any tourism planning remains viable in the long term (Afonso, 2020).

The relationship between tourism and basic sanitation is synergistic in nature and vital for regional development, and the efficiency of sanitation services constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for the viability of long-term tourism projects (Afonso, 2020). From the author's perspective, the impact of sanitation infrastructure directly affects development indicators and the quality of life of both the resident and floating populations. The lack of these services may

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compromise the image of the destination and degrade the ecosystems that sustain tourism activity (Silva & Silva, 2011).

The municipality of Pirenópolis, in Goiás, is an example of the complexity of this relationship. According to Godinho (2010), the location of its tourism infrastructure within a historic center is decisive in explaining how tourism produces geographic space and how the absence of integrated planning generates socioenvironmental contradictions.

Justified by the incipience of investigations on the topic and, above all, by the low effectiveness of sanitation services in the municipality, even after the promulgation of Federal Law No. 11.445/2007 (Law No. 11.445, 2007), this research aims to analyze the role of basic sanitation in the development of tourism in the municipality of Pirenópolis, Goiás, Brazil.

The relevance of this study is evidenced by the significant increase in tourism activity, driven by the search for the city's natural, cultural, and gastronomic attractions, as well as by the positive contribution that tourism provides to the local community. According to Ruiz (2014), urban planning constitutes a fundamental instrument for the competitiveness of tourist destinations, since indicators of basic infrastructure are directly related to the attractiveness of the destination and the capacity for visitor retention. In this sense, analyzing this process in Pirenópolis makes it possible to identify the existing gaps between the growth of tourism demand and the availability of basic services.

METHODOLOGY

This is a bibliographic and documentary study of a qualitative nature with exploratory and descriptive objectives. The search for bibliography (articles and book chapters) was conducted in the Google Scholar database using the keywords "*Goiás*", "*Infraestrutura Turística*" and "*Desenvolvimento Regional*". In addition, criteria such as temporal scope (2021–2025), Portuguese language, open access, and peer review were adopted. After the literature review, documentary research was conducted with the objective of consulting laws and demographic and socioeconomic data. This stage was carried out using official governmental and administrative sources available on the internet, such as the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics [IBGE]), Federal Law No. 11.445 of 2007 (*Lei Federal nº.* 11.445 de 2007), the National Sanitation Information System (*Sistema Nacional de Informações em Saneamento* [SINISA]), and the Tourism Observatory of the State of Goiás (*Observatório do Turismo do Estado de Goiás*), among others.

Based on the two data collection procedures conducted, the data obtained were systematized in tables and graphs in order to provide greater understanding and will be discussed based on the theory of tourism and basic sanitation, seeking to understand the relationships existing in these areas and their implications for the development of tourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Brief characterization of the municipality of Pirenópolis, Goiás

The municipality of Pirenópolis is located in the microregion of the Entorno do Distrito Federal, in Brazil. Its population is approximately 26,690 inhabitants, with a population density of 12.13 inhabitants per km² and a territorial area of 2,200.369 km² (IBGE, 2022). In Figure 1, it is possible to observe the territorial and environmental context of Pirenópolis. The image highlights its main roads, rivers and hydrographic network, nearby urban areas, and the presence of the *Parque Estadual dos Pireneus*.

Figure 1. Characterization of the municipality of Pirenópolis, Goiás

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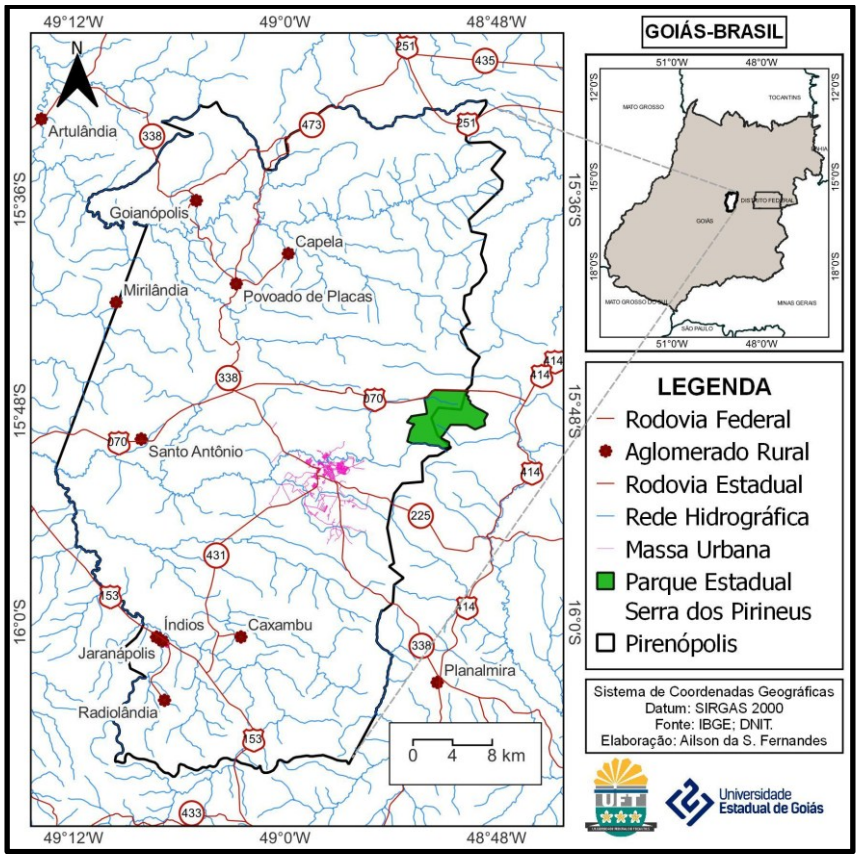


Source: *Silva, Fernandes & Santos (2025).*

Founded in 1727 as a small settlement during the *ciclo do ouro*, the city had its economy impacted by fluctuations in this commodity, experiencing a recovery in 1800 based on agriculture, particularly cotton production and livestock farming (Prefeitura Municipal de Pirenópolis, 2026). Currently, tourism is one of the drivers of the city's economic development. Pirenópolis is part of the *Região Turística do Ouro*, more specifically within the governance structure of the *Fórum de Turismo da Região do Ouro*, and develops segments such as Business and Events Tourism, Adventure Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Rural Tourism, and Ecotourism. In addition, the sector generates approximately 980 direct jobs and offers about 7,699 beds distributed across various types of accommodation facilities (Ministério do Turismo, 2026).

In economic terms, regarding the tourism development of Pirenópolis, it is possible to observe that the total revenue derived from tourism activities showed significant differences between the periods analyzed, namely 2021 and 2023. In 2021, the total revenue amounted to R$1,290,058.10, whereas in 2023 the total reached R$2,389,996.89 (Observatório do Turismo do Estado de Goiás, 2025). This may indicate significant economic growth of the activity within only two years. The municipality has a strong artistic expression, with the presence of ateliers, craft fairs, and major cultural events, including *Festa do Divino Espírito Santo*, *Cavalhadas de Pirenópolis* (Figure 2), *Canto da Primavera*, *Piri Jazz Festival*, *Flipiri – Festa Literária*, PiriBier, and the Gastronomic Festival of Pirenópolis (Ministério do Turismo, 2026).

Figure 2. *Cavalhadas de Pirenópolis*

Source: *G1 Goiás (2022).*

The *Cavalhadas* (Figure 2) have been held for more than 200 years and are part of the celebration of the *Festa do Divino Espírito Santo*. On this occasion, masked horsemen simulate a battle between Moors and Christians and follow the Catholic calendar. The peak of the tradition occurs on the *Domingo do Divino*, 50 days after the Resurrection of Christ, on Easter Sunday (G1 Goiás, 2022).

The following section presents a theoretical and spatial overview of the object of study based on the bibliographic and documentary research conducted.

Sanitation and Tourism Development in Pirenópolis, Goiás

The effectiveness and quality, as well as the expansion of universal access to basic sanitation services, constitute fundamental factors for improving the population's quality of life, as they exert a direct influence on public health, environmental balance, and economic progress. In this context, the expansion of financial investments in the city's infrastructure is also related to the tourism sector, integrating a comprehensive strategy for socioeconomic development (Madeira, 2010).

Within this line of reasoning, Goodwin (2014) argues that, before considering tourism development, it is necessary to take into account the people who live in a given destination. According to the author, it is essential to provide better living conditions for the local population, since by improving their quality of life, places also become more suitable to be visited. In other words, planning and investing in infrastructure and basic services play an essential role for a destination, as ensuring safety and dignified living conditions for residents consequently provides better conditions for tourists.

With regard to the planning of basic sanitation in the city of Pirenópolis, it was observed that until 2020, according to data from the *Sistema Nacional de Informações em Saneamento* (SINISA), Pirenópolis did not have a Municipal Basic Sanitation Plan, as indicated by Silva, Fernandes & Santos (2025). This scenario persisted until mid-2023 and, according to the authors, was believed to be a factor impacting the population's well-being and social indicators. At that time, a decline was observed in the *Índice de Desempenho dos Municípios* (IDM), calculated by the *Instituto Mauro Borges* (IMB), with a reduction in the health *IDM* from 7.81

to 7.52 in that year[6]. Although this index is influenced by several variables, a deficit in the provision of basic sanitation can be observed, which also affects public health.

Subsequently, through Decree No. 4,078, the Municipal Basic Sanitation Plan from Pirenópolis was approved on July 11, 2023 (Decree No. 4.078, 2023). The document aims to "plan, implement and manage the provision of basic sanitation services in the Municipality, establishing the planning of actions with popular participation and complying with the principles of the main federal, state and municipal laws, policies and guidelines" (Prefeitura Municipal de Pirenópolis, 2023, p.31).

The inclusion of public participation in the formulation and development of the Municipal Basic Sanitation Plan demonstrates compliance with what is expected from discussions within the scope of public policies, that is, that they are conducted with and for the population, and not merely to represent management interests. In this sense, Bramwell (2004) highlights that social groups may be discouraged from engaging in public policy discussions due to a cultural acceptance that planning decisions are made by a small group of individuals, or because they have historically been excluded from such decisions. Therefore, encouraging local participation in legal instruments makes it possible to give visibility and recognition to the needs of individuals.

Despite the approval of the Municipal Basic Sanitation Plan, the analysis of the indicators revealed a fragility of the municipality in relation to the parameters considered ideal. This reality can be observed in Table 1, which consolidates the data regarding the percentage of the population covered by treated water supply and sanitary sewage services in the municipality.

Table 1. Basic sanitation conditions in Pirenópolis, Goiás

Year	Population served with treated water (%)	Population served with sewage services (%)
2018	99,2	0
2019	99,3	0
2020	99,2	0
2021	99,3	0

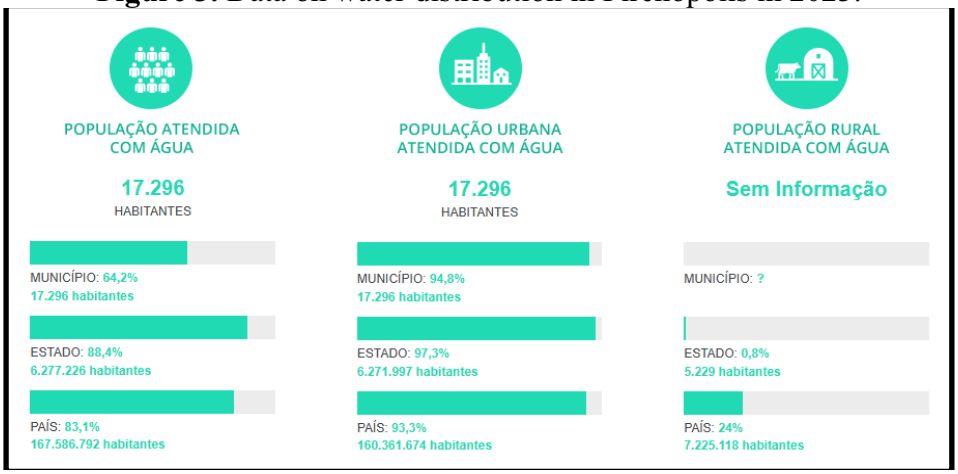
Source: *Created by the authors, based on IMB (2025).*

Based on the data presented, a divergence between the analyzed variables was identified. While the number of individuals with access to treated water remained relatively constant over the years, there is no record of a population served by sanitary sewage services, whether due to structural limitations or for unspecified reasons. This situation may contribute to the incidence of *Doenças Relacionadas ao Saneamento Ambiental Inadequado* (DRSAIs), commonly associated with deficiencies in the supply of potable water, sanitary sewage infrastructure, and solid waste collection and management services.

According to Silva, Fernandes & Santos (2025), in 2021 data from *SINISA* indicated that the distribution rate covered only 67.76%, with 100% coverage in urban areas and 0.36% in rural areas. It was therefore observed that the rural population of Pirenópolis has restricted access to water, remaining isolated and on the margins of urban development. More recent data, referring to 2023, reinforce that this problem persists, given that the rural population with access to water showed a disparity, since municipal indices were not even published, and state data indicate a reduction from 12.02% in 2021 to 0.8% in 2023, as shown in Figure 3.

6 Instituto Mauro Borges. (2025). *Base de dados estatísticos*. Retrieved from https://www.imb.go.gov.br/bde/

Figure 3. Data on water distribution in Pirenópolis in 2023.



Source: *SINISA (2023).*

Based on these data, it is possible to infer that this problem affects the development of tourism in rural spaces, such as agritourism, rural tourism, nature tourism, among other segments. In this sense, questions arise regarding the impacts and limitations imposed on both residents and tourists by the lack of access to water. With regard to the treatment of solid waste, it was verified that in rural areas collection is carried out twice a week through specialized vehicles and teams (Silva, Fernandes & Santos, 2025), and the waste is directed to open dumps in neighboring localities (Prefeitura Municipal de Pirenópolis, 2023).

From this perspective, Nicoleti (2002) emphasizes that municipal administrations face numerous adversities, among which urban contamination stands out as one of the most relevant issues, becoming particularly noticeable in tourist destinations, especially on weekends. In a convergent manner, Heller and Pádua (2010) highlight the existence of a direct relationship between social progress and sanitation, indicating that nations with higher social indicators and a broad provision of these services tend to present higher levels of quality of life. Thus, the higher the degree of development, the lower the tendency for deficiencies in sanitation and the occurrence of related diseases (Silva, Fernandes & Santos, 2025).

This scenario of inefficiency in water distribution and in the provision of sanitary sewage services may be intensified by tourism activity, since the municipality faces pressure resulting from the increase in the floating population, especially during the summer season and the occurrence of events, as indicated in the Municipal Basic Sanitation Plan (Prefeitura Municipal de Pirenópolis, 2023). According to the document, this population was estimated at 23,401 for the year 2026 and may reach 24,669 in 2030. In this context, the Municipal Basic Sanitation Plan establishes that, in order to mitigate the impacts of events, they must be scheduled in advance, enabling the verification of the capacity to serve residents and the additional demand (Prefeitura Municipal de Pirenópolis, 2023).

In addition to the floating population associated with second homes, another factor that may aggravate this situation is the increase in collective households, a category that includes establishments such as hotels, motels, and boarding houses. For these enterprises, an estimated occupancy of 12,963 people is projected for 2026, which may reach 13,666 in 2030, thereby further increasing the pressure on the existing sanitation infrastructure (Prefeitura Municipal de Pirenópolis, 2023). In summary, the municipality has historical relevance and drives tourism in the state, but it is not immune to the impacts of tourism and the reality of basic sanitation. Despite its significant tourism attractiveness, it faces challenges similar to those of many other

regions, such as the need for efficient sanitation solutions that accommodate population growth and safeguard cultural and natural heritage (Silva, Fernandes & Santos, 2025).

According to Beni (2019), infrastructure constitutes an essential, although often imperceptible, foundation upon which a quality tourism experience is built; its absence or inadequacy compromises the competitiveness of the destination, regardless of how unique its attractions may be. Therefore, in the analysis of the municipality of Pirenópolis, a significant absence of water distribution and sanitary sewage services was observed. Furthermore, limitations were identified in the effective distribution of this resource, particularly in rural areas. This situation reveals structural weaknesses that may compromise both the quality of life of the resident population and the sustainability of tourism activity, considering the fluctuations in demand during different periods of the year.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis revealed a paradox in the municipality's sanitation system. While the provision of treated water in the urban area is nearly universal, reaching approximately 99%, the record of the population served by sanitary sewage services remains null, indicating deficiencies in infrastructure or serious failures in the management of the available data. This scenario may have been aggravated by the fragility of the recently implemented Municipal Basic Sanitation Plan and by the disposal of solid waste in open dumps, which directly affects health indicators, as demonstrated by the decline in the *IDM* in the health sector.

The pressure exerted by tourist flows, particularly due to weekend seasonality, intensifies urban pollution and increases the demand for services that the municipality is still unable to provide universally, especially in rural areas and districts, where access to water and sanitation is even more precarious. In summary, for Pirenópolis to maintain its tourism competitiveness and ensure the well-being of its population and visitors, it is important that economic growth be accompanied by planning and investment in sanitation infrastructure, recognizing sanitation as an essential pillar for achieving sustainable tourism development.

The challenges and gaps identified in the local infrastructure indicate the need for future research that integrates public health, tourism dynamics, quality of life, and social equity. In this regard, epidemiological studies are suggested to correlate the incidence of *DRSAIs* with areas of lower sanitary sewage coverage, considering that the municipality presents a null record of service provision through a sewage network, which may explain impacts on local health indicators, such as the decline in the *IDM*. Furthermore, future studies may analyze how peaks in demand during holidays and cultural events, such as the Cavalhadas and gastronomic festivals, overload waste collection and water supply systems, whose understanding is essential for adequate planning and also for preventing negative impacts on the competitiveness of the tourist destination.

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MULTIPLE LOOKS, MULTIPLE THREADS: UNDERGROUND WIRING WEAVING THE DOMESTIC TOURIST EXPERIENCE OF PIRENÓPOLIS, GOIÁS, BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT: *This article investigates the theoretical and practical implications of underground cabling on the domestic tourist experience and the preservation of cultural heritage in Pirenópolis, Goiás, Brazil. As a historic city recognized by IPHAN, Pirenópolis faces the challenge of balancing urban infrastructure modernization with the conservation of its colonial aesthetic. Through a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2026, this study explores how the removal of overhead power lines mitigates visual pollution, enhances the aesthetic quality of the historic urban landscape, and promotes sustainable tourism. The findings indicate that underground infrastructure not only improves the visual perception of tourists but also contributes to urban sustainability and the valorization of architectural heritage. The research highlights the necessity of integrating aesthetic considerations into urban planning to foster a more immersive and pleasant tourist experience, providing a framework for similar historic destinations.*

KEYWORDS: *Underground cabling, Domestic tourism, Cultural heritage, Visual pollution, Urban aesthetics.*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary tourism has consolidated itself as a socioeconomic phenomenon of great relevance, acting as a strategic vector for regional development and the appreciation of cultural heritage (Goes, 2021). The preservation of historical heritage combined with the demand for enriching tourist experiences constitutes a significant challenge in urban contexts, especially in tourist destinations characterized by cultural and historical abundance, such as Pirenópolis, Goiás. In this sense, tourism in historic cities requires planning that harmonizes economic activity with the preservation of local identity, promoting sustainable territorial development (Santos et al., 2023). The touristification of colonial cities in the interior of Brazil has demonstrated that proper heritage management is essential to avoid degradation and promote an authentic experience (Karner et al., 2024).

According to Porto and Brasil (2013), the presence of overhead or underground wiring is one of the most important factors in the planning of street afforestation. Therefore, in addition to the aesthetic benefits, underground wiring contributes to urban sustainability initiatives. Reducing visual pollution is aligned with the creation of greener and more sustainable environments, strengthening the importance of integrating this technology into future urban practices. Urban infrastructure plays a decisive role in the aesthetic perception and environmental quality of public spaces. The transition from overhead to underground wiring emerges as an effective technological solution to mitigate visual pollution and enhance the architectural collection (Rodrigues, 2021). Recent studies corroborate that visual pollution negatively affects the tourist experience and perception of the urban landscape, making the

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mitigation of these elements a priority for historical destinations (Gao et al., 2024).

Piveta and Filho (2002) understand that this planning should occur in all cities, regardless of their size. When this planning is done correctly, the implementation is easy to execute, with the presence of underground wiring and underground pipes being the most relevant factors during the planning process. As such, underground wiring continues to play a key role in building more attractive, sustainable, and culturally preserved cities. Its contemporary relevance highlights the need for innovative approaches to address the visual challenges of urban areas, driving urban planning into the future. The aesthetic enhancement provided by wire burying has been shown to increase the willingness to pay of residents and tourists, reflecting the economic and social value of the unobstructed landscape (Ishigooka et al., 2021).

Tourism is an economic, cultural and social activity that emerged in the nineteenth century, in the context of the Industrial Revolution (Trigo, 1998). The municipality of Pirenópolis (GO), founded in 1727, is recognized for its relevant architectural, urban, and landscape complex, having been listed by IPHAN in 1990 (Pina, 2024). In Pirenópolis, tourist activity began to develop more expressively in the twentieth century, around the 1970s, when the first visitors began to frequent the city and its natural and cultural attractions. The relationship between the development of tourism and urban transformations in Pirenópolis highlights the complexity of managing heritage in the face of growing tourist demand and gentrification processes (Silva, 2025).

According to Castro (2007), in 2002 underground wiring was introduced in Pirenópolis. The implementation of this infrastructure represented a milestone in the requalification of its historic center, allowing the removal of dissonant elements from the colonial landscape (Milagres, 2023). In this way, the absence of overhead poles and wires creates a cleaner and more open atmosphere, allowing the city's architecture and historical elements to stand out. This not only contributes to the beauty but also positively influences the urban experience. Pina (2024) points out that the installation of underground wiring in the historic center of Pirenópolis is an example of how historic cities carry within themselves the connection between the past and the future, requiring a management that values cultural heritage and collective memory. The Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach reinforces that conservation must be integrated with sustainable development, considering infrastructure as part of the heritage ecosystem (Ripp et al., 2025).

Tourism must be sustainable in itself, but it must also help sustain the community and the local environment (Swarbrooke, 2000). Therefore, urban aesthetics directly influences tourists' decision when choosing destinations to visit. The implementation of underground wiring transforms cities into more visually pleasing places, providing a competitive advantage by attracting visitors seeking unique aesthetic experiences and heritage preservation. Tourist satisfaction in heritage destinations is intrinsically linked to the visual quality of the environment and the preservation of historical authenticity (Zhu et al., 2025).

The incipience of specific empirical studies on the underground wiring system in Pirenópolis highlights the importance of this research. In view of this gap, a systematic review of the scientific literature is proposed, based on theoretical and conceptual approaches, in order to understand how the underground infrastructure system is theoretically treated with regard to the visual preservation of historical heritage and the aesthetic experience in the tourist area. The relevance of this research lies in the search and contribution to the development and understanding of how underground wiring can theoretically contribute to the visual preservation of the historical heritage of Pirenópolis and pleasantly influence the aesthetic experience of tourists, providing useful directions for sustainable urban practices. Given this scenario, the

question arises: how can we evaluate the pleasant potentials of this implementation for the aesthetic experience and the conservation of historical heritage?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research rests on a systematic review of the scientific literature, focused on peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2026, complemented by classical theoretical references in the area of tourism and urbanism. The rigorous selection of sources covered international and national academic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO, and Google Scholar, prioritizing works that conceptually discuss the implementation of underground infrastructure in urban tourist contexts and the management of historical heritage.

The search strategy was outlined with terms related to "underground cabling", "visual preservation", "urban aesthetics", "visual pollution" and "cultural heritage", ensuring an in-depth analysis of publications that align with the objective of this research. Studies that address the touristification of colonial cities, the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach and the aesthetic perception of tourists in heritage destinations were included.

The data analysis was conducted qualitatively, highlighting the different theoretical perspectives on underground wiring and its influence on visual and aesthetic preservation in historical tourist destinations. The categorization and synthesis of the identified concepts provided a solid theoretical framework, integrating the researcher's vision and the broader understanding of the theme. In addition, the research uses the observation of the urban space of Pirenópolis, documented through photographic records from its own collection, to illustrate the theoretical discussions and evidence the visual impacts of the absence of aerial wiring in the historic center.

RESULTS

The results of the literature review indicate that visual pollution, characterized by the excess of wires, poles, and advertising, is one of the main detractors of urban environmental quality and the tourist experience in historic centers (Gao et al., 2024). The transition to underground networks is widely recognized as an effective intervention for urban requalification, promoting the aesthetic and real estate enhancement of the affected areas (Ishigooka et al., 2021). In Pirenópolis, the absence of direct empirical studies on underground wiring highlights the need for further investigation, but the literature on similar cities confirms the benefits of this infrastructure.

The visual analysis of the historic center of Pirenópolis reveals the magnitude of the positive impact of underground wiring. Figure 1 illustrates a typical colonial mansion in the city, where the historic façade can be appreciated in its entirety, without the interference of electrical or telecommunications cables. Visual clearance allows architectural details, such as sash windows and ceramic tile roofs, to take center stage in the urban landscape, enriching the observer's aesthetic perception.

Figure 1. Colonial mansion in Pirenópolis without visual interference from overhead wiring.

Source: Own collection, 2023.

Thus, the systematic review of the literature and the observation of the case in Pirenópolis demonstrate that the implementation of underground wiring not only meets, but exceeds expectations in the preservation of the landscape. Enjoyable potentials include effective visual preservation, an enriched aesthetic experience for visitors, and a substantial contribution to the conservation of historical heritage. The absence of overhead poles and wires allowed the colonial architecture and historical elements to stand out, creating a unique and pleasant atmosphere.

The positive influence on the aesthetic experience of tourists is evidenced by the creation of cleaner and more open environments, promoting a more immersive appreciation of historical heritage. Figure 2 presents another significant example of local architecture, demonstrating how the visual continuity of the facades along the street is kept intact. The harmony between the buildings and the stone pavement (pé-de-moleque) is preserved, offering the tourist a trip back in time, free from the visual ties of industrial modernity.

Figure 2. Visual continuity of the historic facades in the center of Pirenópolis.

Source: Own collection, 2023.

In addition, underground wiring was not limited to aesthetics, but brought with it benefits for urban sustainability and cultural preservation. Reducing visual pollution, it has contributed to greener and more organized environments, highlighting the importance of innovative approaches to address visual challenges in tourist urban areas. The integration of infrastructure with heritage is a fundamental principle of the Historic Urban Landscape approach (Ripp et al., 2025).

The monumentality of religious buildings is also largely benefited by this intervention. Figure 3 depicts one of the historic churches of Pirenópolis, whose grandeur and symmetry can be contemplated without visual cuts. The relationship between the sacred building and the sky, a crucial element in colonial religious architecture, is reestablished, enhancing the symbolic and cultural value of the monument for the community and visitors.

Figure 3. Historic church with unobstructed visibility.

Source: Own collection, 2023.

DISCUSSION

The discussion about underground wiring in historic cities transcends mere technological substitution, inserting itself into the broader debate on touristification and heritage management. Karner et al. (2024) argue that "culture-touristification" in colonial cities such as Pirenópolis drives urban transformation, where culture and heritage are mobilized to attract tourism. In this context, underground wiring acts as a catalyst for this transformation, raising the aesthetic standard of the destination and, consequently, its tourist appeal.

Tourists' perception of the quality of urban design is a determining factor for their satisfaction and loyalty to the destination. Studies indicate that the perceived authenticity and visual quality of the historical environment positively influence visitors' emotions and behavioral intentions (Zhu et al., 2025; Li et al., 2025). Figure 4 illustrates a broader perspective of the historic center, showing how the absence of overhead wiring contributes to the visual cohesion of the urban complex. The harmony of colors, the textures of traditional materials and the human scale of the streets are perceived in an integral way, configuring a rich and authentic sensory landscape.

Figure 4. Perspective of the urban complex of the historic center of Pirenópolis.

Source: Own collection, 2023.

However, it is imperative to recognise the challenges associated with these interventions. Silva (2025) highlights the relationship between the development of tourism and the gentrification process in Pirenópolis. The valorization of urban space, driven by infrastructural improvements such as underground wiring, can lead to an increase in the cost of living and the exclusion of the low-income local population, replaced by tourist developments and new residents with higher purchasing power. Therefore, urban management must seek a balance, ensuring that aesthetic and economic benefits do not result in the loss of the community's social and cultural identity.

Cultural infrastructure, such as cinemas and theaters, also benefits from visual requalification. Figure 5 shows the city's old cinema, a landmark of local cultural life. The visual depollution of its immediate surroundings enhances the building and reinforces its importance in the collective memory, integrating it harmoniously into the city's tourist and cultural itinerary.

Figure 5. Old cinema in Pirenópolis integrated into the requalified landscape.

Source: Own collection, 2023.

Finally, the pleasant potentials of the implementation of underground wiring in Pirenópolis were clearly perceived in the results of this research, confirming its effectiveness in promoting a more pleasant tourist experience and in the conservation of the local historical heritage, in addition to providing a more sustainable visitation. Figure 6 consolidates this vision, presenting a typical street in the historic center where the symbiosis between the built heritage, the traditional pavement and the clear sky creates an idyllic scenario, representative of the success of the urban intervention.

Figure 6. Typical street of the historic center evidencing the aesthetic harmony.

Source: Own collection, 2023.

CONCLUSIONS

The various theoretical perspectives identified highlight the contemporary relevance of underground spinning technology for urban sustainability and cultural preservation. The removal of aerial visual pollution is not only an aesthetic improvement, but a profound intervention in the way the historic space is experienced, interpreted and valued by both residents and tourists.

The case study in Pirenópolis, although supported by observations and correlated literature in the face of the scarcity of direct empirical data, provided valuable insights into the practical implementation of underground wiring. The city emerges as an inspiring example of how this infrastructure can be effective in creating aesthetically preserved environments, attracting tourists and preserving its historical richness. The visual clearance allows a clear reading of the colonial architecture, strengthening the identity of the place.

The importance of innovative approaches in the urban management of historic tourist destinations is suggested. Underground wiring is not just a technical solution; It is a key piece in the preservation of cultural identity, the promotion of enriching tourist experiences and the construction of sustainable cities for future generations. It is recommended that future research carry out empirical studies with primary data collection from tourists and residents, to quantify the impacts of this infrastructure on the satisfaction and socio-spatial dynamics of Pirenópolis.

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PODCASTING FOR TOURISM: A NEW KIND OF TRAVEL GUIDE"

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ABSTRACT: *This paper shares the findings from a teaching experiment carried out at the IPSAR "Le Streghe" high school in Benevento, Italy, during the 2022/2023 academic year (prot. 0005813/U). The project engaged around forty fourth-year students who utilized the Loquis platform to create geo-referenced podcasts and descriptive texts, all aimed at documenting and sharing the cultural heritage of Benevento. Rooted in an action-research approach (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), the study sought to empower students, transforming them from passive consumers of information into active digital storytellers of their own community. The findings reveal that students not only gained a deeper understanding of their cultural heritage but also felt more confident in their digital skills. This activity fostered essential cross-disciplinary skills—such as communication, storytelling, and digital literacy, in line with the DigComp 2.1 framework—while also enhancing the students' connection to their local area. The study proposes that geo-referenced podcasting is an exciting new avenue in tourism education.*

KEYWORDS: *Loquis, tourism podcast, digital storytelling, active learning, territorial enhancement*

INTRODUCTION

The Italian tourism industry is currently experiencing a significant shift, driven by digital advancements and the rise of geo-referenced content on mobile devices. Tourists no longer limit themselves to consulting paper guides or institutional websites; they seek authentic narratives, stories rooted in local communities, and local voices capable of conveying the complexity and charm of a place. In this context, the ability to produce high-quality digital tourism content has become a key professional skill, both for companies in the sector and for local tourism promotion bodies.

It is within this framework that the experiment discussed in this paper is situated. During the 2022/2023 academic year, the IPSAR "Le Streghe" high school in Benevento carried out an innovative educational project involving two fourth-year classes, totalling approximately forty students, who used digital tools, including Loquis, a geolocation platform for multimedia content, to document, interpret, and narrate the Benevento area through the production of geo-referenced podcasts, photographs, and descriptive texts.

Benevento is a Samnite city with an immense cultural and artistic heritage, known for the legend of the witches, the "Arco di Traiano", the Norman "Duomo", the Church of Santa Sofia (a UNESCO world heritage site), the "Teatro Romano", and an extraordinary density of historical evidence. However, despite its potential, Benevento often remains on the margins of the most well-known tourist circuits. The educational challenge was therefore twofold: to develop students' digital skills while simultaneously contributing to the enhancement of a rich yet often overlooked cultural heritage.

The literature on digital tourism has progressively shifted its focus from the simple digitization of services to the more complex question of the production and circulation of territorial narratives. Urry (1990) had already anticipated, with his concept of the "tourist gaze," how tourist experience is fundamentally an interpretive act mediated by cultural representations. The digital revolution has amplified this dynamic, multiplying the number of actors capable of producing representations of a given territory.

In Italy, Petracca (2019) has extensively documented how, in the era of Travel 2.0, user-generated content (UGC) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) exert a significant influence on tourists' perception of destinations and their purchasing decisions. This phenomenon has profound implications for professional training in the tourism sector: those working in

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hospitality must be able to produce credible, authentic, and technically competent content, not merely consume it.

Geolocation introduces a further layer of complexity and richness. As Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) demonstrate, multimedia content shared online acts as a mediator of the tourist experience: by stimulating emotions, fantasies, and travel-related memories, it provides the viewer with virtual access to places and social contexts that would otherwise be distant. This process shapes the perception of a place even before the physical visit, transforming the relationship between tourist information and physical location. Loquis fits fully within this trend, allowing audio narratives, photographs, and texts to be linked to precise geographical coordinates, thereby restoring the place to its central narrative role.

METHODOLOGY

The objectives of the experiment can be articulated on two distinct yet closely interconnected levels: the research objectives, which concern the production of knowledge about educational practice, and the teaching objectives, which describe the expected learning outcomes for the students.

The research adopts the action research paradigm as proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), which involves recursive cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. This approach was chosen because it allows the teacher-researcher to act simultaneously as an agent of change and as a critical observer of their own practice, thereby generating contextualized and immediately applicable knowledge.

The research design combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies. On the qualitative side, the following were employed: participant observation in the classroom and in the field; student reflective diaries; semi-structured interviews at the end of the experience; and analysis of the products created on Loquis. On the quantitative side: pre- and post-intervention questionnaires to assess motivation, perceived self-efficacy, and knowledge of the local area; and an analytical evaluation grid for the products.

The project was structured into five distinct phases, spread over six weeks (from February to April 2023). The timeline considered the school calendar, logistical constraints related to field trips, and the need to alternate moments of collective work in the classroom with sessions of autonomous production. Students from two fourth-year classes participated in the activity. The group had a heterogeneous composition in terms of learning profiles, a characteristic that was considered a resource rather than an obstacle.

The pedagogical framework draws on the tradition of active teaching and situated learning. Dewey (1938) had already identified direct experience and the resolution of real-world problems as the primary drivers of authentic learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) further developed this perspective, demonstrating how participation in real and socially meaningful activities is a necessary condition for the acquisition of genuine social practices. The project also aligns with the project-based learning approach: as Krajcik and Shin (2014) illustrate, PBL enables students to actively construct their own understanding by engaging in authentic activities, developing collaborative skills and critical thinking through the production of concrete artifacts.

The activity was designed with constant reference to the European DigComp framework (Carretero, Vuorikari, and Punie, 2017), updated to version 3.0 (December 2025), which organizes citizens' digital competences into five areas: Information and Data Literacy, Communication and Collaboration, Digital Content Creation, Safety, and Problem Solving. The experience with Loquis directly engaged areas 1, 2, and 3.

RESULTS

The products created, eight Loquis in total, garnered significant interest. Their publication on an authentic platform functioned as a powerful motivational lever. The awareness of producing public content, accessible to real tourists, instilled in students a heightened attention to detail and a sense of communicative responsibility that is difficult to achieve with purely scholastic activities. Notably, several students continued to refine their Loquis independently even after the formal conclusion of the project.

Secondly, the experience produced unexpected effects on the students' sense of belonging to their territory. Students who initially declared that they found Benevento "a boring city" or "with nothing interesting" radically changed their perception during the activity. Active research transformed what was taken for granted into an object of discovery and wonder.

Thirdly, the management of students with special educational needs (BES) and specific learning disorders (DSA) benefited from the multimodal nature of the activity. Students with difficulties in formal writing found in the audio register a more accessible expressive channel, while students with low academic self-esteem enhanced their photographic or visual research skills, thereby gaining positive visibility within the group.

Fourthly, some non-negligible organizational difficulties emerged, including lab management, variability of internet connectivity, and the need for devices with sufficiently high-quality microphones. These critical issues, duly recorded, provide valuable insights for the redesign of the experience in the future.

DISCUSSION

The initial phase was dedicated to building the foundational knowledge and motivation for the project. A presentation on the Benevento area was held, with particular attention to historical-cultural sites less known to the public: the monumental complex of Santa Sofia (a UNESCO site), the Museo del Sannio, the Roman Theater, the urban section of the Via Appia, and Ponte Leproso. The objective was to awaken in the students a sense of wonder towards a heritage that, out of habit, they tended to take for granted.

Subsequently, the installation and guided discovery of Loquis took place. Each student registered on the platform (Loquis Studio: https://studio.loquis.com/), created a personal profile via the educational workspace account, and listened to three or four existing examples from different areas of Italy to understand its communicative form. This phase of conscious consumption proved fundamental: hearing how other creators had constructed their narratives provided concrete reference models.

Audio production proved to be the most challenging task. Recording one's voice with a professional tone, maintaining a smooth narrative pace, and calibrating the language for an audience of adult tourists required numerous attempts. Most groups made several recordings before achieving a satisfactory version. The teacher provided constant feedback, concretely demonstrating the difference between a scholastic register and a popularizing one.

Writing the texts highlighted another core difficulty: many students tended to reproduce the format of a school essay rather than a tourism promotion text, the latter being characterized by an engaging opening, essential information, emotional involvement, and an evocative closing. Negotiating these quality criteria became a moment of highly valuable metalinguistic reflection.

Photo selection, also used for the creation of a digital book with the Book Creator platform, and editing required visual curation work: the groups had to choose images that best represented the uniqueness of each site and that worked coherently alongside the text and audio. Explicit criteria were proposed, including lighting, composition, absence of distracting

elements, and evocative power.

At the end of the production phase, each group published their work on Loquis. This moment of publication had a considerable emotional and motivational impact. Seeing their own work on the platform, with the point of interest marked on the map and the possibility of being heard by anyone passing through those streets, gave the experience a dimension of reality very different from submitting a school assignment. A structured peer review session was also held: each group listened to and evaluated the Loquis of other groups. The comments were shared anonymously in a real-time plenary session using the Mentimeter platform and often suggested revisions and improvements that groups spontaneously decided to adopt.

CONCLUSIONS

The experiment demonstrated how Loquis can constitute a teaching tool of considerable potential for schools in the tourism sector. The combination of geolocation, multimedia production, and authentic publication generated a learning environment in which students acted not as passive recipients of cultural content, but as active narrators of their own territory.

This project aligns with the perspective that Perrenoud (1999) defines as the construction of competences through complex and authentic situations: not the transmission of abstract knowledge, but the active mobilization of knowledge in contexts that replicate real-world challenges.

Questions related to scalability and sustainability remain open: how many resources — in terms of time, training, and technology — does a similar experience require? How can continuity be ensured without depending on the availability of a single motivated teacher? These questions do not diminish the value of what has been achieved; rather, they guide future work towards the construction of structural conditions that make this type of innovation an ordinary, not exceptional, practice.

Narrating one's territory is the first professional act for those who choose to work in hospitality. Teaching students how to do it well, with digital tools and with authentic cultural awareness, is one of the most significant tasks that schools can undertake.

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GASTRONOMY AND CULTURAL APPRECIATION OF ARTISANAL CHEESE IN THE AGRESTE REGION OF PERNAMBUCO

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ABSTRACT: *The artisanal production of food has been recognized as an important element for cultural appreciation, territorial identity, and economic dynamization in different Brazilian regions. In the Agreste region of Pernambuco, the production of artisanal queijo coalho constitutes a historical practice linked to family farming and local ways of life. In this context, initiatives such as the Cheese Route and the project Chão de Queijo have contributed to increasing the visibility of these products and strengthening the connections between gastronomy, culture, and regional tourism.In light of this scenario, the present study aims to understand how the appreciation of gastronomy associated with the artisanal production of queijo coalho in the Agreste region of Pernambuco contributes to the promotion of gastronomic tourism and to the strengthening of regional cultural identity. This research adopts a qualitative approach with an exploratory and descriptive character, based on a bibliographic and documentary survey conducted in databases such as Google Scholar, the CAPES Periodicals Portal, and SciELO, in addition to journalistic materials related to the topic.The analytical corpus was examined based on the content analysis proposed by Bardin (2011), allowing the organization of information into three categories: food systems and local culture; territoriality and gastronomic identity; and gastronomic tourism as a strategy for regional valorization.The results indicate that artisanal queijo coalho plays a relevant role in the construction of the food identity of the Agreste region of Pernambuco, while also consolidating itself as a strategic resource for the development of gastronomic tourism. In addition to generating income and strengthening family farming, initiatives such as the Cheese Route increase the visibility of the region's food heritage. It is concluded that the appreciation of territorial gastronomy can significantly contribute to cultural preservation and to the socioeconomic dynamization of the region.*

KEYWORDS: *Gastronomy, Cultural Identity, Gastronomic Tourism.*

INTRODUCTION

Food constitutes a central element in the construction of cultural identities and in the social organization of communities. Beyond fulfilling biological needs, food expresses symbolic values, traditions, and ways of life that are historically structured within specific territories (Cascudo, 1967). In Brazil, cultural and environmental diversity has contributed to the formation of distinct dietary practices in each region, resulting in a broad and heterogeneous gastronomic heritage (Dória, 2014).

In the Brazilian Northeast, particularly in the Agreste region of Pernambuco, the artisanal production of queijo coalho represents a traditional activity linked to family farming and local sociocultural dynamics. The region is characterized by semi-arid climatic conditions, irregular rainfall, and a strong presence of small rural properties, factors that directly influence agricultural and livestock production methods (IBGE, 2022; APAC, 2022). In this context, artisanal queijo coalho emerges not only as a food product but also as a cultural expression that integrates culinary knowledge passed down through generations and production practices

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adapted to the territory.

The culinary knowledge associated with the production of traditional foods is strongly related to local food systems, which involve different stages of the food cycle, from production to consumption (Gain, 2020). These systems incorporate social, cultural, and economic dimensions that influence the way food is produced, prepared, and valued by communities (Poulain & Proença, 2003).

In recent years, the appreciation of traditional food products has been consolidated as a strategy for territorial development and tourism promotion. In this sense, initiatives such as gastronomic routes and culinary events have contributed to enhancing the visibility of regional products, stimulating new economic and cultural opportunities (Cavignac, 2019).

In the Agreste region of Pernambuco, the Artisanal Cheese Route project emerges as an initiative aimed at promoting the value of artisanal cheesemaking in the region, connecting producing municipalities and offering gastronomic experiences linked to local culture. In addition to increasing the visibility of producers, this initiative contributes to strengthening territorial identity and fostering regional gastronomic tourism.

In light of this scenario, the present study aims to understand how the appreciation of gastronomy associated with the artisanal production of queijo coalho in the Agreste region of Pernambuco contributes to the strengthening of cultural identity and to the development of regional gastronomic tourism.

METHODOLOGY

The research is characterized as exploratory and descriptive, with a qualitative approach, and is primarily based on bibliographic and documentary surveys. This type of approach allows for the understanding of complex social and cultural phenomena, especially those related to dietary practices and territorial dynamics (Gil, 2008).

The bibliographic survey was conducted using databases such as Google Scholar, the CAPES Periodicals Portal, and SciELO, in addition to consulting books and journalistic materials related to regional gastronomy, food systems, and artisanal food production. The search for publications used descriptors such as: food systems, culinary knowledge, artisanal cheese, territorial gastronomy, and Agreste region of Pernambuco.

The temporal scope of the research covered publications from 2019 to 2025, prioritizing recent studies on food, culture, and territorial development. Initially, 20 scientific articles and 3 journalistic reports were identified. After an exploratory reading, two articles were excluded for not being aligned with the research objectives, resulting in 18 articles in the main corpus of analysis.

The selected materials were analyzed using the content analysis method proposed by Bardin (2011), which allowed for the organization and interpretation of data. The analysis was guided by three thematic categories:

1. Food systems and regional food culture
2. Territoriality and gastronomic identity
3. Gastronomic tourism and the valorization of local products

The documentary research was based on information available on institutional websites, promotional materials, and the websites of the cheesemaking establishments participating in the Cheese Route of the Agreste region of Pernambuco, which were analyzed to identify production characteristics, location, and organizational aspects of the activity. Only the cheesemaking establishments identified as participants in the initiative during the period of the study were considered (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Cheesemaking establishments participating in the Cheese Route.
Source: Revista Algo Mais, 2025.

Understanding the relationship between artisanal production and territory requires the spatial identification of the enterprises involved in the production chain. In this sense, mapping the cheesemaking establishments participating in the Cheese Route in the Agreste region of Pernambuco allows for the visualization of the geographic distribution of these production units and highlights their integration within the regional context.

The location of these cheesemaking establishments reveals not only the concentration of the activity in specific municipalities of the Agreste but also the articulation between traditional production practices, local economic dynamics, and initiatives aimed at promoting regional gastronomy. Thus, the cartographic representation presented below contributes to understanding how artisanal cheese production is territorially organized, reinforcing the relationship between food culture, regional identity, and local development (Figure 2).

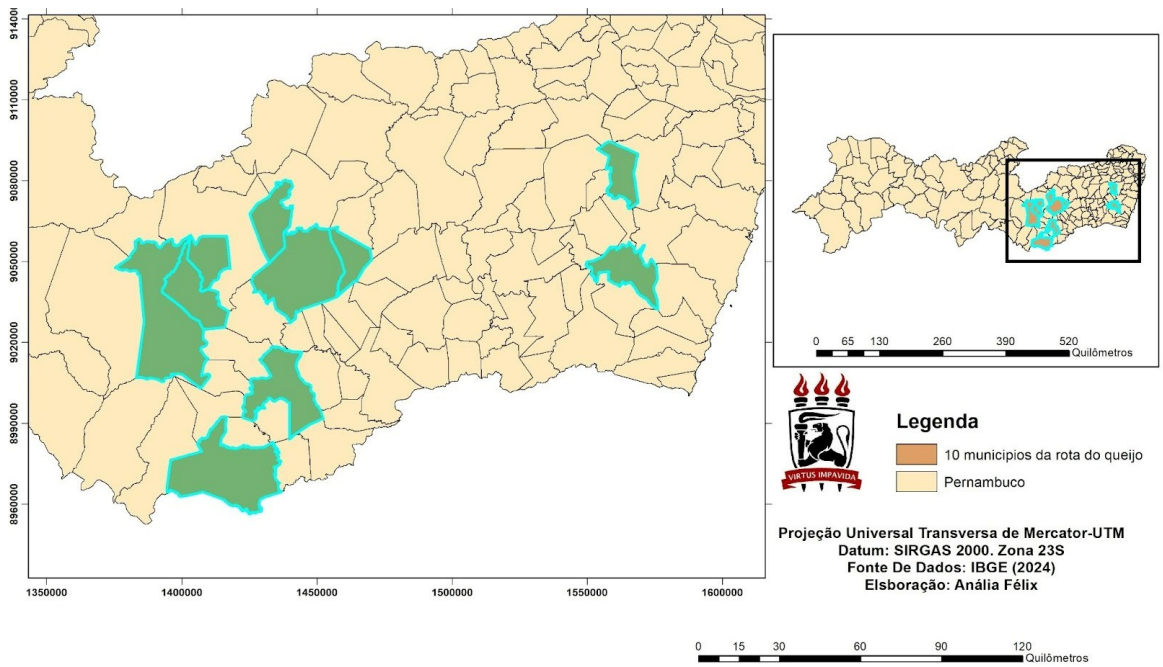

Figure 2. Location of the cheesemaking establishments participating in the Cheese Route in the Agreste region of Pernambuco.
Source: Prepared by the authors based on IBGE data, 2024.

This methodological approach allowed for the integration of different theoretical and empirical perspectives on the topic, contributing to the understanding of the role of gastronomy in the valorization of the territory and the strengthening of regional tourism.

RESULTS

Food systems correspond to the set of activities and relationships involved in the production, processing, distribution, and consumption of food. This system includes not only the technical stages of the production chain but also social, cultural, and economic aspects that influence how food is produced and consumed in different contexts (Gain, 2020). Therefore, understanding food systems requires considering the interaction among the various agents involved in the process, such as farmers, producers, traders, and consumers.

Poulain and Proença (2003) emphasize that food cannot be understood solely as a biological necessity, but also as a social phenomenon structured by cultural practices and collective norms. In this sense, food choices reflect symbolic values and traditions shared by communities.

In the Brazilian context, cuisine results from a historical process marked by the encounter of different cultural matrices, such as Indigenous, African, and European traditions. This process has contributed to the formation of a diverse gastronomy, with specific characteristics in each region of the country (Dória, 2014). Food, therefore, expresses not only daily habits but also collective memories and cultural identities.

In the Brazilian Northeast, traditional dietary practices maintain a strong connection with the territory and rural ways of life. Cascudo (1967) already pointed out that eating habits vary according to the cultural and environmental conditions of each region, defining what is socially recognized as food. In this way, culinary knowledge constitutes an important part of cultural heritage, as it encompasses knowledge transmitted across generations regarding the production, preparation, and consumption of food.

In this scenario, the artisanal production of queijo coalho in the Agreste region of Pernambuco represents an example of a traditional food system, in which productive practices and local knowledge are integrated into regional culture. The production process involves specific techniques, ranging from milk handling to the stages of coagulation, pressing, and cheese maturation, demonstrating the presence of both technical and cultural knowledge associated with the activity (Soares apud Pereira, 2020).

Thus, the relationship between food and territory has been widely discussed in studies on food culture and regional development. Territory is not limited to a geographic dimension but involves social, symbolic, and economic relations constructed by the groups that inhabit it (Santos, 1996).

In this sense, artisanal food production can be understood as a form of cultural expression that strengthens the bonds between community and space. According to Santos, Silva, and Lima (2023), traditional productive practices reflect ways of life and historically constructed identities, contributing to the maintenance of a sense of belonging to the territory.

In the Agreste region of Pernambuco, the production of queijo coalho constitutes an activity linked to rural culture and family farming. In addition to representing a source of income for various families, this activity preserves traditional knowledge related to cattle management, milk production, and artisanal cheese making.

Another relevant aspect concerns local productive arrangements, which consist of forms of economic organization based on cooperation among producers, institutions, and local agents. These arrangements can contribute to the strengthening of the regional economy and the valorization of products associated with the territory (Nascimento et al., 2022).

Furthermore, certification and recognition initiatives, such as quality seals and geographical indications, can play an important role in enhancing the value of regional products. These strategies allow for the highlighting of specific characteristics related to the place of origin, strengthening cultural identity and expanding commercialization opportunities.

DISCUSSION

In the process of documentary survey of the cheesemaking establishments participating in the Cheese Route in the Agreste region of Pernambuco, ten production units associated with the initiative were initially identified. However, for the purposes of analysis in this study, only five cheesemaking establishments were considered. This delimitation occurred due to the availability and consistency of information accessible in the documents and institutional websites consulted. In some cases, the establishments presented limited or insufficient data on aspects relevant to the investigation, such as production characteristics, years of operation, organizational structure, and relationship with the territory.

Thus, the analysis focused only on those establishments with more complete and systematized information, allowing for a more consistent interpretation in light of the analytical categories adopted in the research, such as food systems, territorialization, and local development. This strategy aimed to ensure greater rigor in the qualitative analysis of the data, without compromising the representativeness of the productive experiences present in the studied route (Table 1)

Table 1. Characterization of the cheesemaking establishments participating in the Cheese Route in the Agreste region of Pernambuco

Cheesemaking Establishment (Municipality)	Products	Type of Cheese	Years of Operation	Production Method	Food System	Territoria-lization	Contributions to Local Development
Coobellac (Alagoinha)	Goat *queijo coalho*, dulce de leche, and goat butter	Goat *coalho*	Since 2008	Artisanal production with milk pasteurization, coagulation, curd cutting, pressing, and salting; includes matured and smoked variations	Integrated system based on local goat milk production, artisanal processing, and direct sales	Cooperative organization among producers in the Alagoinha region, valuing productive knowledge and local resources	Income generation for family farmers, producer training, and strengthening of regional productive identity
Dipotenza Latteria (Pombos)	Sheep cheeses (Pecorino, Tomme de Brebis, Boursin) and cow cheeses (*Coalho*, Minas Padrão, Parmesan), as well as ricotta and derivatives	Sheep and cow cheeses	Since 2021	Artisanal techniques inspired by Italian tradition, with coagulation, pressing, salting, and controlled maturation stages	Integrated production with own sheep and cattle herds, internal feed management, and quality control	Territorial insertion associated with gastronomic tourism and valorization of regional artisanal production	Job creation, strengthening of rural tourism, and diversification of regional cheesemaking production

Cheesemaking Establishment (Municipality)	Products	Type of Cheese	Years of Operation	Production Method	Food System	Territoria-lization	Contributions to Local Development
Fazenda Caboclo (Pedra)	Traditional, seasoned, truffled, dehydrated, and lactose-free *queijo coalho*; butter and yogurts	Artisanal *coalho*	Since 1987	Production with own milk, coagulation, pressing, and manual salting, with curing variations and ingredient additions	Integrated production system linking milk production, artisanal processing, and local commercializ ation	Direct relation with the Pedra territory, highlighting *queijo coalho* as an element of regional food culture	Job creation, strengthening the dairy chain, and promotion of rural tourism
Fazenda Henrique (São Bento do Una)	Traditional and seasoned artisanal *queijo coalho*	Artisanal *coalho*	More than 20 years	Processing with fresh farm milk, coagulation, pressing, and manual salting, with controlled curing	Closed production system, with local production, processing, and distribution	Integration into the *Artisanal Cheese Route* and recognition of São Bento do Una as a production hub	Strengthening local production chains, income generation, and promotion of gastronomic tourism
Fazenda São José (Garanhuns)	Matured *queijo coalho*, specialty cheeses, butter, milk, and yogurts	Matured and specialty cheeses	Since 1934	Artisanal production with own milk, filtration, coagulation, pressing, salting, and controlled maturation	Integrated system with own herd and utilization of by-products	Participation in the *Cheese Route* and valorization of Garanhuns' rural landscape	Income generation, strengthening of rural tourism, and preservation of traditional productive knowledge

Source: Prepared by the authors, 2025.

The analysis of the bibliographic and documentary material shows that the artisanal production of queijo coalho in the Agreste region of Pernambuco encompasses dimensions beyond its nutritional function. As noted by Gain (2020) and Poulain and Proença (2003), food systems involve complex interactions between production, culture, and consumption, reflecting social practices and values shared by communities.

In this context, the studies analyzed indicate that artisanal queijo coalho is directly related to the traditional culinary knowledge of the region. Production involves knowledge transmitted across generations, including manufacturing techniques, herd management, and commercialization processes. These elements demonstrate that the activity is not limited to an economic practice but also represents an important component of local food culture (Medeiros, 2023).

Another aspect highlighted concerns the relationship between artisanal production and territoriality. The results indicate that queijo coalho functions as a symbolic marker of regional identity, as its production is associated with specific cultural practices of the Agreste region of Pernambuco. As discussed by Silva (2021), traditional foods often act as elements of territorial identification, reinforcing the links between product, culture, and place.

Furthermore, initiatives aimed at promoting artisanal production have contributed to increasing the visibility of these products. Projects such as the Artisanal Cheese Route of

Pernambuco bring together different cheesemaking establishments in the region and promote activities related to tasting, visiting, and selling products. These actions bring producers and consumers closer together, strengthening regional gastronomic identity and encouraging rural tourism.

From a socioeconomic perspective, the production of queijo coalho also plays a significant role in the local economy. Studies indicate that the activity provides income for numerous families and mobilizes production chains associated with agriculture and dairy farming (Cabral et al., 2020). In this sense, the valorization of artisanal products can contribute to strengthening regional economies and to maintaining rural populations.

However, some challenges remain, especially regarding sanitary regulations and access to broader markets. Many small producers face difficulties in meeting the legal requirements necessary for the formal commercialization of their products. Thus, public support policies and training initiatives are essential to ensure the continuity and sustainability of artisanal production.

CONCLUSIONS

The study aimed to understand the relationship between the artisanal production of queijo coalho in the Agreste region of Pernambuco and the processes of cultural and territorial valorization associated with regional gastronomy.

The analysis showed that artisanal queijo coalho constitutes a significant element of the food culture of the Agreste, as it integrates culinary knowledge, traditional production practices, and forms of social organization present in rural communities. These aspects demonstrate that cheese production should not be understood solely from an economic perspective, but also as a cultural expression linked to the territory.

The results also indicate that initiatives aimed at promoting regional gastronomy, such as the Artisanal Cheese Route, can help increase the visibility of local producers and strengthen the gastronomic identity of the region. Moreover, these actions foster integration between food production, culture, and tourism, generating new opportunities for economic development.

However, the consolidation of these initiatives depends on the implementation of public policies capable of supporting small producers, particularly regarding sanitary regulations, product certification, and access to markets. Strengthening these strategies can help ensure the continuity of traditional practices and promote the sustainable development of rural communities in the Agreste region of Pernambuco.

Thus, it can be concluded that the valorization of traditional food products represents an important strategy for preserving cultural heritage and stimulating local economic dynamics, reinforcing the relationship between gastronomy, territory, and regional identity.

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WATER QUALITY IN ARAGUACEMA (TO): PHYSICAL-CHEMICAL INDICATORS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF DOMESTIC TOURISM

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ABSTRACT: *The study analyzes the development of domestic tourism at Praia da Gaivota, in the municipality of Araguacema, in the state of Tocantins. This region is recognized as a tourism cluster associated with sun and beach tourism, sport fishing, ecotourism, and camping activities. The research is based on the understanding that water resources are directly linked to territorial dynamics and patterns of land use, which are often influenced by anthropogenic pressures resulting from both tourism and regional economic activities. The study collected water samples in June 2024 for physical-chemical, limnological, and microbiological analyses, which were subsequently compared with CONAMA Resolutions No. 274/2000 and No. 357/2005. The results indicate anthropogenic influence in the studied region, especially in areas of higher tourist use, associated with domestic effluents, agricultural activities, and tourism. Health risks were also observed; although within legal limits, the data point to the need for environmental monitoring and sustainable management of tourism activities in the region.*

KEYWORDS: *River beaches; Araguaia River; Bathing water quality; Environmental monitoring.*

INTRODUCTION

The spatial and territorial dimensions of tourism demonstrate significant potential for reducing regional inequalities. Thus, domestic tourism contributes significantly to the generation of jobs and income and has established itself as an important economic driver, capable of strengthening public policies aimed at structuring and bolstering the industry in Brazil.

By definition, domestic tourism highlights the importance of local destinations; thus, it redefines the tourist/local dichotomy and reconceptualizes distance, as individuals, based on their travel preferences, favor nearby destinations (Bayih & Singh, 2020). Thus, the physical environment is strongly interrelated and must remain in a condition that is economically viable, socially just, culturally appropriate, and, above all, ecologically sound.

Nevertheless, it is evident that the environment, in the face of tourism growth, gives rise to negative externalities that directly impact the nature of the places visited (Dutra, 2016). In this context, planning and studies are fundamental for the establishment of any activity related to the environment, so that host communities do not suffer negative impacts caused by local tourism.

In this context of environmental protection, the Araguaia River emerges, with a length of 2,114 km, forming one of Brazil's most important water systems and hosting an ecosystem of high ecological and socioeconomic significance (Fernandes, 2025). Currently, the basin is identified as one of the priority areas for the conservation of the Cerrado biome and for the maintenance of water resources (Bayer et al., 2020). However, the historical process of land use and occupation is responsible for intense siltation, erosion processes, and the contamination of soils and water sources (Castro, 2011), as well as implications for economic use, which

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depend on its ecological integrity (Angelo, 2010).

During the dry season, between June and September, water levels in the Araguaia River drop, and under intense siltation pressure, extensive sandbars emerge on the riverbed—a natural phenomenon that attracts thousands of visitors every year. This stretch of riverbank is called a temporary "river beach," formed seasonally and sustaining tourism, yet situated within a system fundamentally transformed by agricultural development and irregular land appropriation, with public management focused solely on boosting tourism, while large-scale environmental changes remain unresolved.

In this context, the municipality of Araguacema, in the state of Tocantins, in northern Brazil, has emerged as a tourist hub for the development of ecotourism, sport fishing tourism, and camping (Machado & Lopes, 2019), primarily due to Praia da Gaivota, the second most visited beach in the state and the largest in terms of territorial extent.

Praia da Gaivota, although considered one of the most traditional sites and a major draw for visitors from all over Brazil, possesses a cultural and socio-spatial character that was not previously a focus of tourism promotion agencies. However, the tourism development of campgrounds, as a public policy, was structured by the "Tocantins de Braços Abertos" project, an initiative by the Tocantins state government to restructure the state's coastal municipalities. According to the Araguacema Sustainable Development Master Plan, issued by the Government of the State of Tocantins (2004), Praia da Gaivota is established as a beach resort that integrates summer tourists into city life, while implementing measures to protect and enhance the natural and built environment.

The importance of the studied region lies in its natural beauty, cultural diversity, and the livelihood it provides to communities that depend on these resources (Muniz, Santana & Oliveira-Filho, 2020). However, the presence of domestic tourism at Praia da Gaivota demonstrates disorderly growth, coupled with a lack of planning and anthropogenic pressures on natural resources, such as the accumulation of waste, the degradation of shorelines, and water contamination. Thus, despite the growing use of water for recreation, the scarcity of studies on the impacts of tourism on bathing water quality remains the central issue of this study.

According to Diegues (2001), water and territory are not merely natural resources, but are intrinsically linked to culture itself, in the material and symbolic reproduction of communities. Thus, water quality transcends the realm of environmental analysis and also constitutes a socio-environmental and political approach. Based on this line of inquiry, the critical investigation of this study highlights the structural problems in the reality under study, specifically regarding the impact of domestic tourism on Praia da Gaivota, which is justified as a necessary tool for formulating territorial planning that reconciles conservation, social justice, and the economy.

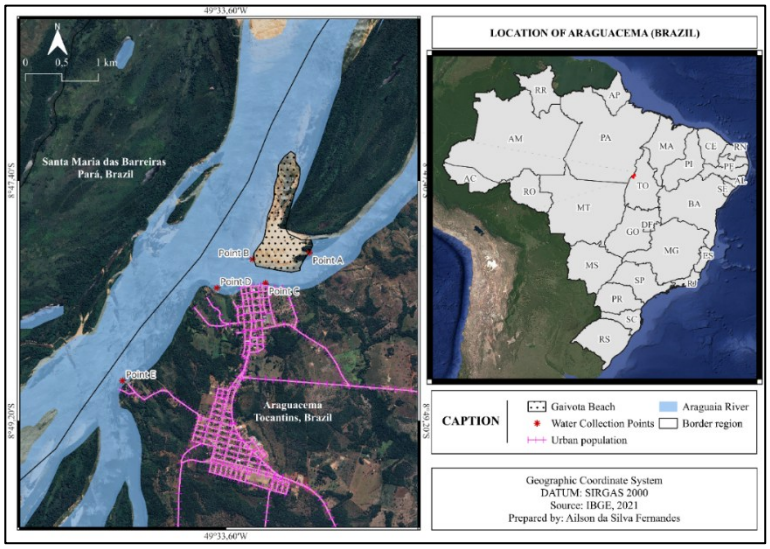
METHODOLOGY

This study is an empirical research project with a quantitative approach based on on-site data collection, aimed at understanding the anthropogenic pressures imposed by river tourism in the municipality of Araguaia do Tocantins, specifically regarding water quality at Praia da Gaivota, located in the Araguaia–Tocantins Basin in northern Brazil.

The sampling points were selected by the authors through mapping of areas commonly frequented by tourists during the Araguaia/Tocantins dry season: Point A (-49.54973, -8.79893) ~ camping area and Point B (-49.55665, -8.79978) ~ swimming area. In addition to three points serving as environmental references (Point C (-49.55515, -8.80286) ~ urban deck, frequently used by tourists to cross from the city to the beach. On the other hand, two more distant areas

were also chosen, though indirectly related to Praia da Gaivota (Point D (-49.56115, -8.80352) ~ environmental area outside the urban zone and Point E (-49.57306, -8.81499) ~ an environmental region that is still preserved but connects road and maritime transportation to the beach (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Geographic representation of the study area and sampling sites



Source: Authors, 2025.

Figure 1 shows the location of Praia da Gaivota and its geographical position within Brazil. In addition, the map illustrates the distribution of the urban area in the study region, as well as the neighboring municipalities. The study area is situated on the banks of the Araguaia River and is located approximately 297 km from Palmas, the capital of Tocantins. The municipality of Araguacema, home to the sandbar used for domestic tourism at Praia da Gaivota, has a census population of 5,927 inhabitants and a per capita Gross Domestic Product of US$13,442.42 (1 USD ≈ R$5.16) in 2022, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (2022).

The samples were handled in accordance with the method suggested in the National Guide for Sample Collection and Preservation (CETESB, 2011), in June 2024, using a water collection protocol compliant with World Health Organization (2022) parameters. Water quality was assessed using physicochemical parameters for organometallic and nitrogenous compounds (orthophosphate, copper, iron, fluoride, detergent, ammonia, sulfur compounds, sulfate, and sulfide), as well as limnological evaluation of dissolved oxygen, pH, nitrite, nitrate, and water temperature. Analyzed using a colorimetric scale with Alfakit's Ecokit. Finally, environmental health risk was also assessed through microbiological analysis (Escherichia coli-EC and total coliforms) using Colipaper, also from Alfakit, applied according to the manufacturer's instructions, with samples collected and incubated in a microbiological incubator at 36 °C for colony-forming unit (CFU) counting.

The results were tabulated and compared with the criteria for primary contact recreation (swimming, bathing, water sports) as set forth in CONAMA Resolution No. 274/2000 and, additionally, with the regulatory limits for water bodies classified as Class 2 freshwater, which are typically designated for recreation under CONAMA Resolution No. 357/2005.

RESULTS

Given the experimental procedures of the study, the authors investigated the physicochemical characteristics and the sanitary and limnological risks present at specific points along Gaivota Beach to assess the impact of domestic tourism on the region's water quality in relation to physicochemical, limnological, and sanitary risks.

Table 1. Analysis of water quality parameters at Gaivota Beach in 2024

Parameters		**Tourist Area**			**Environmental Reference**			**CONAMA Regulatory Limits (Resolutions 274/2000 and 357/2005)**
		(Unit)	Point A	Point B	Point C	Point D	Point E	
Physicochemical	Orthophosphate (PO_4^{3-})*	mg/L	0,24	0,00	0,00	0,22	0,08	up to ~0,03 mg/L
	Detergent (LAS)*	mg/L	0,00	0,12	0,00	0,01	0,00	0,5 mg/L
	Ammonia (NH_3-N)*	mg/L	0,26	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,08	< 3,7 mg/L (pH ≤ 7,5)
	Copper (Cu)*	mg/L	0,69	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,04	0,009 mg/L
	Fluoride (F^-)*	mg/L	0,07	0,07	0,02	0,00	0,03	1,4 mg/L
	Iron (Fe)*	mg/L	0,07	0,10	0,00	0,00	0,05	0,3 mg/L
	Sulfate (SO_4^{2-})	mg/L	3,46	1,59	1,79	5,52	3,54	250 mg/L
	Sulfide (S^{2-})	mg/L	0,01	0,00	0,03	0,01	0,01	≤ 0,002
Limnological	Dissolved Oxygen (DO)	mg/L	4,75	6,00	9,0	9,00	8,00	≥ 5
	PH (pH)	-	6,00	7,00	7,00	7,50	6,00	6,0 - 9,0
	Temperature (T)	°C	32,30	30,19	28,50	29,20	30,30	variation ≤3
	Nitrite (NO_2^-)	mg/L	0,01	0,01	0,01	0,01	0,01	≤ 1,0
	Nitrate (NO_3^-)	mg/L	0,10	0,10	0,10	0,10	0,10	≤ 10
Sanitary	Escherichia Coli (E. Coli)	CFU/100 mL	81,00	43,00	44,00	39,00	54,00	up to 200 CFU/100 mL
	Total Coliforms (TC)	CFU/100 mL	86,00	71,00	60,00	85,00	69,00	up to 200 CFU/100 mL
	Accompanying Flora (AF)	CFU/mL	20,00	12,00	4,00	6,00	0,00	no specific limit established

*Acceptable limit of 0.1 mg/L for drinking water.

Source: Authors, 2025

Table 1 shows the compliance of water quality standards at the evaluated sampling points. Thus, the data generally demonstrate good compliance with the regulatory limits of CONAMA Resolution No. 357/2005 and, additionally, CONAMA Resolution No. 274/2000 for primary contact recreation. The parameters were categorized into physicochemical, limnological, and sanitary parameters.

Regarding the physical-chemical analysis of the study, orthophosphate (PO_4^{3-}) consists of negative ions and is found in the environment, playing a fundamental role in biological and industrial processes. It is orthophosphoric acid (H_3PO_4), which takes on different forms of anion. According to data from Alfakit (2024), phosphorus in sewage commonly appears as organic phosphorus, polyphosphate, and orthophosphate. For example, human or animal waste, as well as food scraps, contain organic phosphorus, and when they decompose biologically,

they produce orthophosphate.

Regarding orthophosphate concentration (Table 1), when examining the reference values for the tourist zone at points A and B, the first point—within the bathing area of Praia da Gaivota—indicates a risk of eutrophication and moderate contamination (0.24 mg/L), while the second point (0.00 mg/L) – demonstrates compliance with the maximum allowed in Class II lotic systems for total phosphorus. In contrast, samples C (0.00 mg/L) show excellent quality regarding phosphorus, with no evidence of contamination, and E (0.08 mg/L) is well above the environmental limit. Meanwhile, point D indicates a risk of eutrophication and moderate contamination, with 0.22 mg/L, above the level permitted by law.

The analysis of surfactants identifies them as the main components of detergents, used to reduce the surface tension of water and increase its contact surface with solids. Thus, LAS (Linear Alkylbenzene Sulfonate) detergents, derived from petroleum, are commonly used in the composition of household detergents and serve as an indicator of domestic sewage pollution (Woodford, 2020). In the results of Table 1, although within the studied environmental parameters, point B (0.12 mg/L) and point D (0.1 mg/L) show the presence of the component in the water, particularly in areas with greater human contact. If it exceeds the safety limit, it can cause significant toxicity to aquatic fauna.

The presence of ammonia (NH_3-N) occurs naturally in water bodies as a result of the degradation of organic and inorganic compounds in soil and water, but it is also present in sanitary sewage, originally related to effluent discharges, urea hydrolysis, and the degradation of amino acid components and nitrogenous compounds (Alfakit, 2024). In Table 1, when examining this component, points A and E show the presence of ammonia at 0.26 mg/L (tourist zone) and 0.08 mg/L (environmental reference zone); however, these values are below the regulatory limits and thus comply with environmental control standards.

The study identifies a significant presence of copper (Cu) at some points (Table 1), specifically at points A and E, with 0.60 mg/L and 0.04 mg/L, respectively. Nevertheless, this represents a scenario of toxicity to aquatic life and indicates industrial contaminants or leaching, generally related to agribusiness.

Regarding the indicators for iron (Fe), fluoride (F^-), and sulfate (SO_4^{2-}), Table 1 shows that all samples analyzed are well below the maximum limit; thus, they reflect good water quality with respect to the presence of these components and compliance with environmental standards.

In addition, the study also assessed the presence of sulfide (S^{2-}). Although there is no specific limit in the guidelines of CONAMA Resolution No. 357/2005, values above 0.003 mg/L indicate negative impacts related to organic pollution or domestic sewage undergoing anaerobic decomposition, given the decomposition of organic matter in low-oxygen environments. In this regard, all sampling points, except for Point B, showed values above the permitted limit. Therefore, continuous monitoring is necessary, especially when correlated with other parameters, such as ammonia and iron, as these may, in theory, indicate possible processes of eutrophication or water degradation (Metcalf & Eddy, 2003).

Data related to limnological parameters show that dissolved oxygen levels at the sampling points reveal the worst results in the tourist area, which directly impacts the region's aquatic biodiversity, as these levels do not meet quality standards; the other parameters, such as pH, water temperature, and nitrite, are within the regulatory quality limits for water bodies. Furthermore, nitrate levels at point D (0.30 mg/L) exceeded the limit set by Resolution No. 357/2005. Nitrate is a compound of nitrogen and oxygen and is essential for life; however, high nitrate concentrations pose a risk to human health, particularly for infants and pregnant women.

The health risk data fall within the limits established by CONAMA Resolutions No. 274/2000 and No. 357/2005 for waters intended for primary contact recreation. In this regard, the results indicate that the observed levels of fecal contamination do not pose a significant risk to the continuation of domestic tourism activities in the region. However, the analysis shows that sites with the highest concentration of visitors exhibit relatively higher levels of contamination; thus, they suggest a direct influence of anthropogenic pressure linked to the recreational use of the area.

DISCUSSION

The ideographic determinants of water resources are inextricably linked to territorial dynamics and, above all, to the traditional practices that shape the occupation of space. On the one hand, declining water quality can profoundly influence the way in which collective coexistence through water use takes shape. On the other hand, the degradation of water in the Araguaia River not only poses environmental risks but also disrupts the ways of life historically established along its banks (Fernandes, 2025).

In this context, the present study, by analyzing the manifestation of Domestic Tourism at Praia da Gaivota in Araguacema do Tocantins, sought to correlate the influence of the Ministry of Tourism (2010) on the promotion of Sun and Beach Tourism. Before presenting the critical determinants identified, a scientific contextualization is necessary.

Historically, the "river beaches" located in the riverside environments along the Araguaia River exemplify the profile of domestic tourism, in which, seasonally, the sandbars that emerge during the period when Brazil experiences cold weather or rain are utilized (SEDETUR, 2015). Given these locational factors, the region attracts many visitors over time, specifically during the beach season, which culturally falls between July and August. It is, therefore, a domestic tourism movement driven by the presence of sun, water, and warmth. Thus, the study assumes that the circulation of capital generated by domestic tourism is undeniable, as it creates jobs and income, in addition to stimulating investments in infrastructure. However, this process presents significant dualities, for while its manifestation can contribute to preservation, it can also trigger processes of destruction (Gössling, Hall & Scott, 2009), as well as enhance and, at the same time, degrade natural resources (Cheng, Wang & Li, 2023), as well as integrating certain social groups and segregating others (Yang, Zhang & Liu, 2025).

According to Santana and Senna (2019), river beaches tend to be found in more preserved environments, sought after primarily for more natural leisure activities. Meanwhile, accessibility is greater in terms of distance for tourists, particularly for residents of Brazil's interior, who prefer these areas rather than traveling to the coast. In this context, the occupation of areas bordering the Araguaia basin (Assis et al., 2025), within this framework of socioeconomic use and planning of the Araguaia, presents as its main conflicts the expansion of the primary sector (agricultural and livestock chain), habitat fragmentation, significant loss of biodiversity, and unregulated tourism (Santos & Faria, 2020).

In the literature, the behavior of the modern tourist demonstrates selectivity in the choice of destinations, as well as greater environmental sensitivity and demands regarding the quality of the experience during the visit (Dolnicar, 2006). In this sense, river beaches are becoming increasingly promising for the formation of a new tourism market segment, focused on leisure associated with aquatic environments and the ecosystem services these spaces offer.

The data suggest a direct anthropogenic influence on water resources, possibly related to agribusiness through the use of phosphate fertilizers and untreated domestic effluents. On the other hand, in areas distant from domestic tourism at Praia da Gaivota, good results were

obtained, which may reflect areas with riparian vegetation cover that remains well-preserved.

Given the possibility of direct discharge of effluents containing detergent (LAS) without proper treatment, the study's findings show that camping areas and the entrance gate connecting the municipality to Praia da Gaivota exhibit an accumulation of these compounds. Although within environmental limits, this result reflects a scenario in which water quality and the ecosystem may be affected, as surfactants, when present in high concentrations in water bodies, negatively impact biodiversity, interfering with the respiration and reproduction of fish and aquatic invertebrates, as well as contributing to algal blooms.

Ammonia is an ammoniacal nitrogen primarily characterized by recent pollution from domestic and industrial sewage and the leaching of agricultural substances into the soil. Nevertheless, the highest concentration is generally associated with the degradation of excreta, such as urine and feces, and with fish farming or aquaculture activities in general (Alfakit, 2024). The presence of ammonia in the study reflects, at Point A (0.26), the anthropogenic impact linked to domestic tourism, while the low concentration found at Point E (0.08), due to its distance, may be associated with rural activity or discharges from vessels traveling in that region. Thus, ammonia concentrations are toxic to fish and, therefore, must be actively monitored, given the indirect impact on sport fishing tourism and the fish supply chain.

The presence of copper found at Points A and E represents a critical scenario, as its presence, in addition to altering the taste of the water, also accumulates in aquatic organisms (WHO, 2011). The situation in the area may be related to mass tourism at Praia da Gaivota and to agricultural products containing copper derivatives, which are commonly used because they directly affect photosynthesis, respiration, and nitrogen fixation, as well as livestock products such as copper sulfate, used in fish farming as an algicide, fungicide, and for parasite control.

Regarding iron concentrations at the analyzed sites, an anthropogenic risk is observed mainly in the tourist zone, though it remains within water safety parameters. Regarding the presence of sulfates and sulfides, although they are not highly toxic, high concentrations of sulfate, in addition to causing laxative effects in humans and animals, alter the water's pH (WHO, 2011). Sulfide, an indicator of anaerobic conditions, is highly toxic to fish and aquatic invertebrates. Consequently, it can cause mortality in sensitive organisms, reduce dissolved oxygen, and generate unpleasant odors (Ecycle, 2024). It also accelerates the corrosion of metal structures in aquatic environments. In the study in question, the values did not pose a health risk, but in areas with higher concentrations, they may be related to agribusiness and the runoff of sulfur-containing fertilizers, or naturally to the decomposition of organic matter (ANA, 2024).

As for limnological factors, the nitrate concentration at Point B is unrelated to the impact of tourism in the region; however, it is widely found in fertilizers used to boost productivity during the agricultural year. On the other hand, dissolved oxygen at points A and B reflects the impact of tourism. This high biochemical oxygen demand, given the scarcity of oxygen, is commonly related to organic pollution and can harm aquatic fauna. Meanwhile, the health risk assessed in the study shows high concentrations of coliforms in tourism areas and waterways in the region. Although within legal parameters, this finding represents a problem that runs counter to sanitation standards.

CONCLUSIONS

Historically, the river beaches along the Araguaia River have experienced significant seasonal fluctuations in tourism, characterized by the formation of sandbars used for recreational purposes during the beach season, particularly between July and August. During this period, there is a heavy influx of visitors, which contributes to job creation and income

generation but can also increase pressures on aquatic ecosystems.

This phenomenon has been discussed in the literature solely in relation to overtourism in the recreational use of river resorts, specifically in Araguacema, by Balderramas (2001). As a result, 25 years later, this study provided empirical evidence of the impacts of tourism expansion, agricultural encroachment, deforestation, and the discharge of urban and industrial effluents along the Araguaia River. For the authors, this dynamic also raises concerns regarding the sustainable carrying capacity for tourism, since the intensification of recreational use can generate significant environmental pressures.

In the analysis of water quality at Praia da Gaivota, based on CONAMA Resolution No. 274/2000—which sets standards for public health and tourism—and on environmental management and water regulations governed by Resolution No. 357/2005, the results indicate that, in terms of physicochemical and limnological parameters, there is a discrepancy with current environmental regulations. High concentrations of orthophosphate, copper, and sulfide, along with low levels of dissolved oxygen at some analyzed points, suggest the presence of pollution sources, exacerbated by the expansion of the primary sector, habitat fragmentation, and unregulated tourism.

Although the sanitary indicators of contamination are within recreational limits, the persistence of other pollutants warrants attention and environmental management measures; therefore, the data underscore the need for improved policies regarding continuous monitoring and the investigation of pollution sources to promote the sustainability and safety of local tourism, as the worsening of the situation could structurally undermine the promising river tourism market in Araguacema do Tocantins.

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