



UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA
FACULTY OF TOURISM AND
HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT
OPATIJA, CROATIA

Tourism in Southern and Eastern Europe

ToSEE 2025

8th International Scientific Conference

Shaping the Future:
Digital Tourism and Sustainable Development



BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

e-ISSN: 2706-2406

15 – 17 May, 2025
Opatija, Croatia

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Volume 8

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Book of Abstracts

Shaping the Future:
Digital Tourism and Sustainable Development

Authors submitted their papers in final form.
Editorial Board disclaims responsibility for language and printing errors.

e-ISSN: 2706-2406

Publisher © 2025 University of Rijeka
Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management
Opatija, Croatia

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EDITORIAL

These proceedings present the contributions delivered at the 8th International Scientific Conference ToSEE – Tourism in Southern and Eastern Europe: “Shaping the Future: Digital Tourism and Sustainable Development”, organised by the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, and held from 15 to 17 May 2025.

ToSEE 2025 is an established conference that provides a multidisciplinary platform connecting the academic community, destination managers, industry experts, the public sector, and students.

The opening keynote presentations were given by renowned international speakers: Dogan Gursoy (*Washington State University, USA*), Carlos Flavián (*University of Zaragoza, Spain*), and Raffaele Filieri (*Audencia Business School, France*).

Of the 54 abstracts originally submitted, 32 full papers were received and, after a double-blind peer-review process, 26 articles were published in these conference proceedings. The papers were authored by 63 contributors from fifteen countries: Croatia, Slovakia, Montenegro, Serbia, Romania, Morocco, Indonesia, Slovenia, Spain, Portugal, Czech Republic, Italy, Germany, Greece, and France.

Aligned with the main theme of the conference and reflecting the diversity of the authors, the papers cover a wide range of research topics, including digitalisation in tourism, sustainability challenges, tourism impacts, human resource management, destination management, participatory approaches, stakeholder involvement and perceptions, crisis management, and technology use in tourism.

We are proud that ToSEE 2025 achieved its goal of bringing together academics and researchers from the tourism sector to foster discussion and critical thinking on the importance of digitalisation in tourism and the empowerment of stakeholders in ensuring sustainable tourism.

Finally, we would like to thank all authors for their contributions and express our sincere gratitude to the reviewers for their valuable insights and suggestions, which significantly enhanced the quality of the papers. We hope the contributions in these conference proceedings will inspire greater engagement and empowerment in sustainable tourism.

Editors
Tomislav Car
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THE EXPERIENCE, SATISFACTION, LOYALTY, AND RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOUR OF CAMPING TOURISTS: INSIGHTS FROM CROATIA

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of different dimensions of camping tourism experience (TE) (aesthetics, entertainment, education, and escapism) on tourist satisfaction (TS) and loyalty (LOY), and how these in turn affect site-specific environmentally responsible behaviour (SERB).

Methodology – A review of recent literature related to TE, TS, LOY and SERB was conducted. Empirical research involved a convenience sample of 751 tourists in Croatian campsites. Data analysis utilized multivariate statistics with the IBM SPSS Statistic Version 29 software. Hypotheses were tested using model in Smart PLS (version 4).

Findings – The empirical research revealed a significant relationship between TE dimensions (aesthetics and escapism) and both TS and LOY. There was a significant relationship between LOY and all SERB dimensions except responsible use of products and responsible behaviour on a campsite (RB). Furthermore, there was a significant relationship between TS and only one SERB dimension of responsible use of products.

Contribution – The findings can help campsites managers develop strategies and design tourism products, services and experiences that will contribute to the TS and SERB of tourists in campsites and prevent further devastation of the environment in a tourist destination.

Keywords tourism experience, tourist satisfaction, loyalty, environmentally responsible behaviour, camping tourism, Croatia

LUKA DONČIĆ'S TRANSFER TO THE LOS ANGELES LAKERS AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT ON SLOVENIAN TOURISM VISIBILITY: A STUDY OF ATHLETE-DRIVEN DESTINATION BRANDING

Abstract

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Purpose – This paper explores the potential impact of Luka Dončić's unexpected transfer to the Los Angeles Lakers on Slovenian tourism. The study investigates potential increases in tourist arrivals, heightened awareness of Slovenia as a sustainable travel destination, and enhanced visibility of its cultural and sporting heritage.

Methodology – A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining Interrupted Time Series (ITS) analysis of digital indicators (Google Trends, social media metrics) with qualitative media content analysis across traditional, institutional, and social media platforms. The research draws on theories of sports tourism, celebrity endorsement, and destination marketing.

Findings – Quantitative results show a significant post-transfer increase in digital indicators of interest toward Slovenia. Qualitative analysis reveals enhanced symbolic association between Luka Dončić and Slovenia's tourism brand, especially in international media. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that sudden athlete-driven events can act as short-term visibility shocks for national tourism.

Contribution – This study introduces the concept of "shock transfers" in athlete-driven destination branding, expanding existing literature on sports tourism and soft power. It highlights how unplanned celebrity movements can create strategic opportunities for small nations to elevate their global tourism image.

Keywords Luka Dončić, Slovenian tourism, sports tourism, celebrity endorsement, destination branding, tourism economics

RESEARCH CHALLENGES AND TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES IN RIVER-PROTECTED AREAS

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Abstract

Purpose – Tourism often depends on natural resources as attractions in protected areas, among them rivers hold significant potential for developing sustainable active outdoor tourism. The purpose of this article is presenting state of the scientific field of sustainable tourism valorisation of protected river areas, aiming to identify research gaps and discover new research opportunities.

Methodology – This paper provides a comprehensive research overview of the role of protected river areas in tourism by analysing 257 scientific articles sourced from the Scopus database using the keywords: *tourism*, *carrying capacity*, *river*, and *protected*.

Findings – The study identified a lack of research on the tourism valorisation of protected river areas, highlighting spatial disparities in interests, insufficient focus on distinct river types, and the neglect of rivers as heterogeneous systems with varying tourism capacity. The findings especially emphasize the insufficient coverage of tourism valorisation of protected karst rivers.

Contribution – To address the observed gaps, the paper proposes a research agenda, offering potential directions and framework for future studies. Among the emphasized methodological steps in the sustainable valorisation of protected river areas, the paper argues the concept of carrying capacity on rivers, which is neither sufficiently developed nor implemented, despite its significant potential for fostering sustainable tourism development.

Keywords tourism, river, protection, natural tourism attractions, sustainable development, carrying capacity

MORE THAN JUST TRAVELING LOW BUDGET – USER EXPERIENCE AND MOTIVATION FOR HOSPITALITY SHARING PLATFORMS

Abstract

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Purpose – The emergence of the sharing economy has redefined travel behavior, giving rise to community-based models of hospitality exchange. Same accounts for the contribution of cycling tourism to the hospitality industry, which continues to grow. Warmshowers.org, an international community-based hospitality platform tailored to touring cyclists, exemplifies this transformation, offering a no-cost platform where long-distance cyclists connect with volunteer hosts. Sharing platforms per se is a broadly investigated field. However, most research focuses on profit-oriented sharing platforms and therefore empirical studies on the success factors of non-profit-oriented sharing platforms remains limited.

Methodology – This paper draws on a large-scale global empirical analysis of the non-profit sharing platform Warmshowers in order to deliver more statistically sound insights into mutual-help sharing platforms. The study investigates the socio-demographic profiles, behaviors, experiences, motivations and patterns of platform usage of participants in the Warmshowers network. A descriptive research design was adopted, implemented through an online questionnaire. A final sample of 9,515 respondents provided data from more than 50 countries.

Findings – Results highlight that the homogeneity of the sharing community plays a fundamental role in the success of non-profit sharing platforms. Findings suggest that the positive impact on mutual-help hospitality experiences are important motivating factors for the use of non-profit sharing platforms. This paper adopts the position that mutual-help sharing platforms provide valued hospitality alternatives, particularly for niche tourism products.

Contribution – This study contributes to ongoing discussions around the dynamics of the SE by emphasizing the importance of user identity and community homogeneity in fostering sustainable, non-commercial exchanges.

Keywords Bicycle tourism; sharing economy; mutual-help platform, motivation, homogeneity; reciprocity

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF AUTOMATED AND ON-DEMAND BERTH BOOKING SYSTEMS IN NAUTICAL TOURISM PORTS

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Abstract

Purpose - Today when digital technologies are included in each business segment it is logical they are also applied in marinas. Subject of this research is application of software for berth reservation in marinas and comparison of reservation management in marina that uses automated reservation system and marina that uses “booking on request” system through reservation platforms.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on the analysis of collected data. The data are from secondary inter source, respectively realized berth bookings in transit marinas in the period from July to September 2023 and 2024. Obtained data are analysed using descriptive and comparison method.

Findings - The analysis of collected data indicates the need of implementation or advancement of digital technologies in the field of reservation systems in marinas. Both analysed models of reservation fulfil their purpose, which is managing berth capacity of marinas, but automated berth reservation model is better in managing real time reservations.

Contribution - This research gives insight to understanding the functioning of berth reservation systems in marinas and highlights the advantage of using automated booking systems.

Keywords nautical tourism, booking, smart technologies, yachting, berth, marina management

CRYPTOCURRENCIES IN TOURISM – A LOCAL COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

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Purpose – The purpose of this research is to explore the opportunities and barriers related to the use of cryptocurrencies in tourism from the local community's perspective. Cryptocurrencies are increasingly accepted worldwide, yet their use in tourism consumption remains limited. Evaluating the attitudes and readiness of residents in urban areas, particularly in Zagreb, is essential for assessing the sustainability of digital payment technologies in tourism.

Methodology – The research was conducted in Zagreb and its surroundings, with a sample of 484 respondents. A structured questionnaire was used to assess knowledge, perceived security, intention to use, and perceived barriers and incentives regarding cryptocurrency usage in tourism. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and Pearson's Chi-square test to examine relationships between key variables and sociodemographic factors.

Findings – The results indicate limited awareness about cryptocurrencies, with more than 75% of respondents being completely unfamiliar or only superficially familiar with the topic. A small percentage currently uses cryptocurrencies, but there is substantial conditional willingness for future usage, particularly if regulatory, educational, and security issues are addressed. Statistically significant gender differences were observed in perceived awareness and trust in Bitcoin systems, with men exhibiting higher levels of awareness and trust compared to women.

Contribution – This study provides valuable insights into local community readiness for cryptocurrency usage in tourism, highlighting the significance of education, trust, and regulatory frameworks. The findings can serve as a foundation for policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and digital innovators to develop strategies for the effective integration of cryptocurrencies into tourism economies.

Keywords cryptocurrencies, tourism, digital payments, local community, technology awareness

ELECTROMOBILITY AND CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR IN TOURISM - CASE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Abstract

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Purpose – Road transport, especially individual car transport, significantly affects domestic and international tourism over shorter distances. Electromobility is vital for transitioning to sustainable transport within tourism, aligning with environmental demands and global initiatives like the European Green Deal. This study presents findings on the ecological aspects of consumer behaviour influencing car transport in Czech tourism, where interest in electromobility has grown. It examines consumer attitudes toward purchasing electric vehicles and factors affecting electromobility in tourism

Methodology – The study uses the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), analysing how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape intentions. Data were collected via a survey questionnaire and analysed using regression analysis and structural equation modelling with IBM SPSS Statistics and Amos Graphics software

Findings – Comfort, flexibility, and speed are key factors influencing consumer behaviour in car transport for vacations. Environmental impact plays a significant role in choosing transport methods. While most respondents do not plan to reduce car travel due to environmental concerns, 37.1% expressed willingness to do so. Positive perceptions of electric vehicles include lower operating costs and environmental friendliness, but practical barriers like charging station availability remain significant.

Contribution – The study highlights growing consumers' willingness to adopt sustainable practices, such as using electric cars, but emphasises the need for better infrastructure, reduced costs, and consumer education. Governments, travel providers, and destination organisations must collaborate to reduce tourism's carbon footprint and support electromobility.

Keywords transport, electromobility, consumer behaviour, sustainable tourism, Czech Republic

THE POTENTIAL OF SPORTS HERITAGE FOR TOURISM – A CASE STUDY OF THE CITY OF ZADAR

Abstract

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Purpose – This paper aims to analyze the potential of sports heritage for the qualitative enrichment of the tourism offer in Croatia. More specifically, the focus of this empirical study is on Zadar, the city of basketball. It will be analyzed to what extent the basketball heritage of the city of Zadar is perceived by tourists and how it can influence the offer and competitiveness of the city as a sports tourism destination.

Methodology – An online questionnaire was created to examine respondents' attitudes towards basketball, local sports facilities, the quality of infrastructure and the impact of sporting events on the overall experience and attractiveness of the city as a destination for sports tourists. The collected data (mid-April to mid-May 2024; 200 respondents) was analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and t-test.

Results – The results indicate that for majority of respondents, sports activities and facilities are important when choosing a destination. Respondents associate Zadar with basketball and show interest in basketball and basketball events. About a third of the respondents believe that Zadar could be a basketball destination, but this would require expanding the range of basketball activities, improving basketball infrastructure, promotion and advertising as well as cooperation with key sports stakeholders, and considering the cost of the overall experience. Respondents who already recognize Zadar as a basketball destination are more interested in basketball-related tourist activities and are more likely to recommend Zadar as a basketball destination than respondents who do not recognize it in that way.

Contribution – In addition to a better understanding of sports heritage and sports nostalgia tourism, this paper has important practical implications for the organizers of the tourist offer in Zadar by providing them with guidelines for the development of the city as a sports tourism destination.

Keywords Sports heritage; Sports tourism; Nostalgia; Basketball; Zadar

SLOVENIAN TOURISM STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN LSP LEARNING

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigated Slovenian tourism students' perspectives on using artificial intelligence (AI) tools in Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) courses to uncover the extent of AI adoption, perceived benefits, and associated challenges.

Methodology – An anonymous online survey was conducted with 387 students from two major Slovenian universities, capturing quantitative and qualitative data on usage patterns, familiarity, and attitudes towards AI integration in LSP.

Findings – Descriptive analysis revealed that two-thirds of respondents occasionally use AI tools for language learning, with ChatGPT being the most popular (used by 90%), followed by Grammarly (30%) and AI Writer (10%). Students primarily leveraged these tools to prepare assignments, refine written expression, correct grammatical errors, and acquire new skills. While appreciating the time-saving benefits of AI tools, concerns about discouraging independent thinking and relying on potentially inaccurate data were prevalent.

Contribution – This research provides valuable insights into the evolving role of AI in modern pedagogy, informing educators on responsible integration while fostering critical thinking and ethical awareness, thereby contributing to understanding how AI tools reshape educational practices and highlighting their potential to transform education while addressing key concerns.

Keywords artificial intelligence, views, language for specific purposes, learning and teaching, foreign languages, tourism students

FROM FAIRY TALES TO LITERARY TOURISM: ENHANCING OGULIN'S TOURIST APPEAL

Abstract

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Purpose – Achieving more sustainable tourism that is also more satisfying for hosts and visitors is one of the key challenges in today's leisure and hospitality industry. Strategies to promote sustainability and increase the satisfaction of locals and tourists vary, but often include the promotion of niche tourism, such as literary tourism. The paper examines the importance of the *Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival*, one of the most famous literary and children's festivals in Croatia, for increasing the tourist appeal of Ogulin as a destination among non-resident festival visitors.

Methodology – For data collection, a face-to-face survey of 62 non-resident festival visitors was conducted during the fall edition of the *Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival* in 2023 using a structured questionnaire. In addition, a deeper understanding was gained through semi-structured interviews with festival visitors.

Findings – The questionnaire survey, combined with interviews, showed how the *Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival* enhances the attractiveness of Ogulin for festival visitors by strengthening the link between literature, local identity and visitor experience. The results show the potential of literary tourism to generate meaningful cultural, social and economic impact at the local level.

Contribution – Mass tourism on the Adriatic coast with numerous unsustainable practices still dominates Croatian tourism development. This article provides insights into the benefits of niche tourism, such as literary tourism, for shaping and enhancing the tourist appeal of a small town in a touristically less visited region.

Keywords: literary tourism, *Ogulin Fairy Tale Festival*, tourist appeal, place-making, tourist experience

SACRED SUSTAINABILITY: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S REFLECTIONS ON TOURISM AND ITS FUTURE

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Abstract

Purpose – As global tourism is often considered less sustainable than ever, studies rethinking the concept of sustainable tourism development are on the rise. One of the improvement strategies is advocating for participative approach and involvement of greater variety of stakeholders reflecting multitude of perspectives. This study aims to show how the religious perspective expressed by the Holy See relates to the concept of sustainable tourism in terms of raising awareness and potentially influencing behaviour change of its followers towards sustainability.

Methodology – Qualitative content analysis was used to examine the 26 publicly available messages published by the Holy See between 2000 and 2024 on the occasion of World Tourism Day.

Findings – Despite the negative aspects that also characterise it, the Holy See experiences tourism primarily as a phenomenon that humanises. The messages can be grouped into three categories that broadly reflect the concept of sustainability: social and economic issues (i.e. the fight against poverty and the establishment of social and economic balance, importance of work, equal rights for women, the development of local communities, the accessibility of tourism for all, peace), environmental (i.e. climate change, biodiversity, water) and technological issues (relationship between technology and nature, sustainable energy, digital transformation).

Contribution – This study contributes to the growing body of research on the future paths of tourism and hospitality. Its novelty lies in the fact that it brings to light a surprisingly “up-to-date”, holistic and comprehensive view of the Catholic Church on sustainable tourism, both in terms of theoretical considerations and practical implications.

Keywords The Holy See, the Catholic Church, sustainable tourism, behaviour change

ANALYSIS OF ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF TWO DIFFERENT SOFTWARE SOLUTIONS FOR DAILY RECORDING OF SHIPS IN NAUTICAL TOURISM PORTS

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Purpose – The research aims to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of two software solutions (SW1 and SW2) for maintaining daily vessel records (DEP) in marinas, i.e., to assess which of the above solutions offers a better ratio of operational efficiency, ease of use, and cost-effectiveness. The secondary aim of the research is to use the comparative advantages and disadvantages of both programs to determine the key settings for the creation of a third program that would optimize the highest quality solutions offered in the programs that are the subject of the research.

Methodology – The study compares SW1 and SW2 for DEP in the marinas under study, using data from identical survey questionnaires completed by the same respondents. The study uses quantitative research methods. Data were collected by surveying sailors using DEP software. Two modern DEP systems based on different technological settings were analysed. The study was conducted in the period from 01.12.2024. to 30.01.2025.

Findings – The results show that the DEP software that are the subject of the study have high ratings for ease of login, application response speed, and reservation review. The lowest ratings relate to recording the vessel's geolocation and photo documentation archive. Analysis by age and education shows that younger users and those with higher education give significantly higher ratings. SW1 is generally rated better in most categories, especially in recording vessel arrivals and departures.

Contribution – The research provides a detailed comparative analysis of DEP software in marinas. Demographic factors such as age and education significantly influence the evaluation. The results can have practical implications for the design of training and user support programs. The research identifies common software shortcomings in geolocation tracking and photo documentation quality, requiring operational technological improvements in performance.

Keywords nautical tourism, daily vessel records, digital transformation, marina management, smart tourism, and nautical tourism ports.

AI-GENERATED HUMOR IN HOSPITALITY SERVICES: EMERGING INSIGHTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN TOURISM MARKETING RESEARCH

Abstract

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Purpose – This study explores the emerging relationship between artificial intelligence (AI), humor, and service experiences, focusing on how AI-generated humor influences customer perceptions in service encounters. Despite the increasing use of AI agents in hospitality and tourism, little is known about the effectiveness and limitations of humor as a communicative strategy in these interactions.

Methodology – A structured narrative review was conducted, including peer-reviewed journal articles that specifically examine humor in human–AI service interactions. Only studies from credible academic journals were considered to ensure relevance and conceptual quality. Thematic synthesis was employed to identify conceptual patterns across study designs.

Findings – Three key themes were identified: (1) humor as a communication style influencing customer perceptions, (2) humor as an emotional recovery strategy, and (3) humor as a moderated effect. While humor can increase perceived warmth, trust, and satisfaction, its effectiveness is highly dependent on contextual factors, user familiarity with AI, and the type of humor employed. Cultural sensitivity, emotional state, and the level of anthropomorphism also play a critical role. Gaps in the literature include the limited number of tourism-focused studies, lack of humor theory integration, and limited differentiation across travel stages or service settings.

Contribution – By bringing together separate findings and pointing out gaps in current knowledge, this paper provides a starting point for future research on AI-generated humor in tourism and hospitality. It suggests theory-based research directions to help both researchers and professionals design AI-driven service experiences that are emotionally engaging and suitable for different contexts.

Keywords AI-Generated Humor, Customer Experience, Human-AI Interactions, Tourism and Hospitality

METAPHORS IN TOURISM PROMOTIONAL DISCOURSE: A CORPUS-ASSISTED STUDY OF THE CYRIL AND METHODIUS CULTURAL ROUTE

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Abstract

Purpose – Metaphors have long been recognised as powerful devices of persuasion, and thus there are many instances of metaphorical language in tourism promotional discourse. This paper describes the use of figurative language on the official website of the Cyril and Methodius Route and examines the role of imagery in tourism advertising to enhance the promotion of cultural sites.

Methodology – The methodological approach adopted in this paper tends to avoid any subjectivity of the research by using artificial intelligence in determining the figurative index of each text on the Cyril and Methodius Route website, which is our text corpus. By using this corpus linguistics approach, quantitative data is collected and interpreted from a cultural perspective.

Findings – A textual analysis reveals some shortcomings in the use of metaphors when addressing potential tourists. In fact, a large number of these devices can be observed, especially in the case of locations with considerable cultural significance in national mythology. As far as such sites are concerned, it is apparently considered desirable to give these attractions a ‘moral claim’ on the tourist, which is an example worthy of emulation for other cultural locations.

Contribution – The Cyril and Methodius Route website provides good material for exploring Dann’s hypothesis that the greater the cultural distance, the more metaphors are used in descriptions of tourist places. However, our research on the promotional materials of the Cyril and Methodius Route shows that the issue is more complex and cultural significance or ‘moral claim’ plays a major role in this area.

Keywords artificial intelligence, corpus linguistics, moral claim, pragmatics, semantics, tourism

REVITALIZING EUROPE'S PERIPHERAL REGIONS: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORK FOR ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper presents the conceptual framework of a multidisciplinary project aimed at the economic revitalization of peripheral regions experiencing significant population decline, particularly the loss of working-age individuals. The project seeks to develop a replicable model for socio-economic recovery, proposing multidisciplinary research for leveraging local resources and sustainable development, building on existing research addressing regional disparities.

Methodology – The project will focus on three areas: (1) Territorial Analysis, using methodologies from spatial econometrics and regional science; (2) Model Development, aimed at creating a framework maximising local resources; (3) Pilot Implementation of local businesses to validate the model in regions matching technological and logistical prerequisites.

Findings – As the project is currently in its conceptual phase, future findings will be contingent on the outcomes of the research. Preliminary insights are being gathered through active participation in conferences and workshops, where feedback from experts in regional development, economics, and social sciences is being solicited to identify potential challenges and opportunities. These interactions are instrumental in shaping the project's design and ensuring its alignment with the needs of peripheral regions. Additionally, the project aims to uncover replicable strategies for attracting and retaining working-age populations, which will be validated through pilot implementations in selected regions.

Contribution – Expected outcomes include a scalable and adaptable economic recovery model applicable across different European regions. The potential impact of this project is significant, promising to attract and retain working-age individuals while fostering long-term socio-economic stability in Europe's peripheral regions.

Keywords Economic revitalization, peripheral regions, demographic decline, aging regions, NFTs, Augmented Reality.

SUSTAINABILITY COMPETENCIES IN HOSPITALITY: PERSPECTIVES FROM INDUSTRY LEADERS

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Purpose – The integration of sustainability in the tourism industry has become a priority, driven by environmental concerns, evolving regulatory frameworks, and technological advancements. However, while sustainability is increasingly recognized as a strategic line, a gap between the theoretical sustainability education offered in academic institutions and the practical competencies required by the industry still remains. This study focuses on how hotel industry managers perceive sustainability as part of their operations, the competencies they consider essential for future professionals’ performance, and how sustainability strategies influence recruitment and employer branding. Furthermore, it is discussed whether current academic programs sufficiently prepare students with the necessary skills and competencies to manage sustainable tourism operations.

Methodology – This study adopts a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, carried out with hotel industry managers responsible for sustainability initiatives in order to examine their views on sustainability-oriented competencies in recruitment and professional development. A content analysis was conducted based on the in-depth interviews and the sustainability reports from leading hotel industry stakeholders, identifying trends in sustainability commitments and workforce integration.

Findings – Findings indicate that sustainability is increasingly incorporated in hotel operations, but significant gaps remain in workforce competencies. Key findings include a general lack of practical training related with sustainability practices while for those already working in companies operating within sustainability concepts, the sustainability training that exists are often generic and don’t sufficiently prepare employees for operational challenges.

Contribution – In continuance, a gap between industry expectations and workforce readiness is indicated. This paper, as contribution, both to the academia and hotel industry, and may help to design and propose initiatives that bridge the gap in perception and expectations of HRM in the sustainable hotel industry.

Keywords Sustainability, tourism workforce development, competencies, green human resource management (GHRM), sustainable tourism

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS: BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH TREND

Abstract

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Purpose – On a global and local level, the tourism sector is constantly growing. This also has an impact on the financial sector. By providing appropriate financial instruments and financial mechanisms such as green investments, digital financial services, tax incentives, state aid and others, tourism is incentivised towards more sustainable tourism models. The aim of this paper is therefore to provide a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of research trends in the field of sustainable tourism development and financial instruments.

Methodology – To investigate the research trends in the field of sustainable tourism development and financial instruments, a bibliometric analysis of 1,469 documents dealing with tourism, finance and sustainability, published until December 2024 and indexed in the Scopus database, was conducted. Some established and innovative bibliometric approaches were applied using Python software, an effective tool for conducting scientific mapping of publications.

Findings – The results of the bibliometric analysis show a steady increase in scientific production in the field since the early 1990s, with a strong acceleration from 2015, followed by a remarkable increase around 2018 and exponential growth in recent years. This growth has been driven primarily by contributions from China, the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Australia and Spain. Research covers a range of key themes, including sustainability and development, tourism and hospitality, financial and economic issues, environmental protection and climate change, and social and community engagement, reflecting the diverse and evolving focus of the discipline.

Contribution – By identifying the research trends in the field, the findings of this paper can help not only the academic community to identify research gaps, but also policy makers and tourism practitioners to promote sustainable tourism models with appropriate financial instruments and financial mechanisms.

Keywords sustainable tourism development, financial instruments, financial sector, bibliometric analysis

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN SHAPING VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM: CASE STUDY IN COASTAL TOURISM DESTINATION OF LOMBOK, INDONESIA

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates the role of digital technology in enhancing visitor experiences and promoting community engagement in community-based tourism (CBT) within coastal destinations. It explores how digital platforms support destination visibility, strengthen visitor-local interactions, and enable inclusive participation in sustainable tourism management, while also identifying key challenges and future opportunities.

Methodology – A qualitative case study approach was employed, using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 18 purposively selected informants, including domestic and international tourists, local tourism actors, government officials, and community organization representatives. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns in technology use, tourist experiences, and community involvement.

Findings – The findings reveal that digital platforms significantly improve access to tourism information and enhance the quality of visitor services. Tools such as websites, booking applications, and social media facilitate trip planning and foster meaningful interactions between tourists and local communities. Furthermore, digital technology empowers local stakeholders to actively participate in tourism promotion and service delivery. However, challenges persist, including limited digital infrastructure, uneven internet access, and generational disparities in digital literacy. Despite these barriers, digital platforms also support the promotion of local products and cultural heritage, contributing to more inclusive and sustainable CBT practices.

Contribution – This study offers original contributions by contextualizing the role of digital technology in CBT development within coastal areas, particularly those facing infrastructural and socio-cultural constraints. It provides empirical evidence on how digitalization can empower local communities and enhance visitor engagement. The study also proposes practical recommendations for improving digital capacity and fostering community-driven tourism innovation. These insights serve as a foundation for future research and policy development aimed at leveraging technology for sustainable and inclusive tourism growth.

Keywords Digital Technology, Community-Based Tourism, Visitor Experience, Sustainable Tourism, Coastal Destinations

ACCESSIBLE TOURISM AND TECHNOLOGY: ENHANCING EXPERIENCES OF BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED MUSEUM VISITORS

Abstract

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Purpose – The slow but noticeable shift in public perception of the importance of accessible solutions in society has led to a need to better understand how people with sight impairments or blindness experience can consume tourism products and services. In this process, the role of technology is of great importance, as technological solutions are used to improve and enhance the offer for this group of tourists. The aim is to determine the level of awareness of museums in terms of accessibility solutions for blind and visually impaired visitors and to examine the extent to which technology is used to overcome barriers in providing services to this visitor segment.

Methodology – Based on the secondary research, which suggests that technology is an important factor in creating an accessible, inclusive and barrier-free tourism environment, a deeply structured online questionnaire was created and distributed to all museums in the city of Zagreb to examine their commitment to providing a quality and inclusive experience for tourists with visual impairments or blindness.

Findings – The accessibility of museums in Zagreb has still not reached its potential and does not fully meet the needs of visually impaired and blind tourists. The reasons for this situation include the fact that museums do not have sufficient financial support for such investments and that there is poor awareness in society of the overall importance and benefits of universal design.

Contribution – A comparative analysis provides an overview of global best practices, which, in combination with the results of primary research, forms the basis for the decision-making process of stakeholders involved in the development of museum accessibility.

Keywords accessible tourism, visual impairment and blindness, museums, technology, universal design

GENERATION Z'S PERSPECTIVE ON RESTAURANT DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

Abstract

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Purpose - This study investigates Generation Z's perceptions, expectations, and concerns regarding the use of digital technologies in restaurants. It focuses on how these technologies influence their experiences before arriving at the restaurant, during their visit, and after leaving.

Methodology - A qualitative approach was employed using collective brainwriting facilitated by the digital whiteboard platform Mural. A total of 27 hospitality students, representing informed members of Generation Z, participated in the study and provided insights into the advantages and challenges of digital tools in restaurant settings.

Findings - The findings show that Generation Z values digital technologies for their speed, convenience, personalization, and eco-friendly aspects. Participants also emphasize the importance of maintaining human interaction to ensure a warm and engaging dining experience. They express wishes for greater integration and functionality of digital systems while noting concerns such as technical issues, privacy, robotization, and potential high costs.

Contributions - The study highlights the need for restaurants to balance technological solutions with personal service to meet the expectations of Generation Z and enhance overall customer satisfaction. It provides practical insights for the hospitality industry on optimizing digital tools while preserving human-centered experiences.

Keywords digital technology, restaurants, Generation Z, customer experience, brainwriting

THE ROLE OF INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN TOURISM - A BENCHMARKING ANALYSIS OF CROATIA, GREECE, ITALY AND SPAIN

Abstract

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Purpose – The purpose of this research is to understand the role and importance of innovative technologies in stimulating tourism and economy, particularly in tourism-orientated Mediterranean economies of the European Union such as Croatia, Spain, Italy and Greece.

Methodology – The research uses a benchmarking analysis to analyse the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in tourism economies. It combines quantitative and comparative methods to analyse economic and digital indicators from 2015 to 2023, using a benchmarking analysis to examine changes in economies and the degree of digital integration and its role on tourism.

Findings – Innovative technologies are significantly influencing consumer behaviour in tourism. These technologies improve the user experience, simplify processes and open up new sources of revenue. Countries that place a higher value on ICT activities in the domestic market use ICT technologies more intensively in tourism. The results show that countries with higher ICT activities also achieve a positive trend in increasing overall tourism competitiveness.

Contribution – This study contributes to the understanding of the role of technological advances on tourism and contribute to a deeper understanding of the differences in digitalization levels among the observed Mediterranean destinations. It provides a foundation for further analysis of the dynamics of digital transformation and its impact on the competitiveness of tourism destinations, offering insights for the practical application of these findings in future development strategies.

Keywords Innovative technologies, tourism, Mediterranean economies, benchmarking analysis

A PILOT STUDY ON WASTE MANAGEMENT ATTITUDES IN CROATIAN NAUTICAL MARINAS

Abstract

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Purpose – As a world-renowned destination for yacht tourism, Croatia's extensive marina network plays an important role in reconciling environmental sustainability and operational efficiency. This pilot study explores the attitudes of key frontline stakeholders — professional skippers, private boat owners and charter guests — towards the effectiveness of waste management in Croatian marinas.

Methodology – The study utilised a multi-channel survey approach and collected data from 151 respondents via a self-administered online questionnaire.

Findings – The results show statistically significant differences between stakeholder groups in their assessment of aspects of waste management, including the effectiveness of environmental policies, operational strategies, infrastructure, penalties and initiatives to promote environmental awareness. Professional skippers consistently rated these aspects significantly lower than the other two groups, reflecting their increased operational awareness and direct involvement in the marina systems. The findings of the study emphasise the need for tailored strategies to address group-specific concerns.

Contribution – By identifying key challenges and opportunities, this study contributes to the development of comprehensive and effective green management solutions that support the long-term sustainability of the Croatian nautical tourism sector. In practise, it provides actionable recommendations for marina operators and other relevant policy makers, such as targeted investments in waste management systems and engagement strategies tailored to specific groups. On a social level, the study emphasises the importance of inclusion in green management practises and highlights the role of stakeholders in promoting sustainable tourism.

Keywords Waste Management, Nautical Marinas, Yachting Tourism, Environmental Sustainability, Stakeholder Attitudes; Croatia

AI-BASED PERSONALIZATION MODEL: A CASE STUDY ON MOROCCAN MUSEUMS

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Abstract

Purpose – The present study demonstrates how Artificial Intelligence (AI) can enhance cultural tourism by offering personalized recommendations within Moroccan museums. While this approach is widely used in general travel contexts, it remains underexplored for museums, where both demographic characteristics and service perceptions vary considerably. Our proposed framework integrates service quality perceptions, satisfaction scores, and demographic variables to predict which museum aligns best with tourist profiles and preferences. We specifically target five museums in Morocco, selected for their diverse geographic locations and distinct offerings. Our primary objective is to achieve high precision in recommendations and validate the model's performance across varied demographic segments.

Methodology – A structured questionnaire was administered to collect visitor data at five Moroccan museums. The dataset encompasses demographic details (age, gender, nationality, and income), visit frequency, and subjective service-quality perceptions (tangibles, staff conduct, and exhibit quality). A logistic regression classifier was then employed, utilizing a grid search to optimize precision while maintaining balanced recall. The dataset was cleaned and examined for biases before training and testing the model, ensuring reliability and robustness. Additionally, importance analysis was performed to identify the variables that most strongly predict museum choice.

Findings – The final model attained a precision exceeding 90%, correctly suggesting an appropriate museum for a given visitor profile in nine out of ten instances. This high precision remained stable across multiple demographic segments, indicating the model's robustness. Our empirical analysis underscores that the combined use of demographic and service-quality variables yields more accurate predictions than demographics alone, with tangibles and empathy emerging as particularly influential factors in museum selection. Despite these promising results, the study recognizes limitations such as the relatively narrow geographic scope and the limited number of museums analyzed. Future research could address these constraints by extending the model to additional cultural institutions and incorporating broader visitor behaviors, such as revisiting intentions.

Contribution – Theoretically, this paper expands the literature on AI-driven personalization in cultural tourism, demonstrating that logistic regression can offer high-precision predictions when demographic and service-quality dimensions are integrated. Empirically, it provides a replicable methodology for data collection and modelling in museum contexts, highlighting that demographic-service interactions can significantly enhance prediction accuracy. Practically, the findings showcase how AI can improve cultural experiences by tailoring offerings to visitor profiles and informing museum managers on targeted marketing and exhibit design.

Keywords Museum service quality, customer satisfaction, recommender system

THE IMPACT OF DIGITALIZATION AND EDUCATION ON TOURISM REVENUE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: AN ARDL APPROACH

Abstract

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Purpose – The study investigates the impact of digitalization and education on international tourism revenue in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. Given the increasing reliance on digital platforms in the tourism industry, understanding the role of broadband infrastructure, internet penetration, and educational factors is essential for policymakers and industry stakeholders.

Methodology – An Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) model examined the short- and long-term relationships between tourism revenue and independent variables (broadband subscriptions, internet use, education expenditure, tertiary enrollment) using 2003-2021 data from World Bank. The study also includes a trend variable to capture long-term structural changes in tourism revenue.

Findings – Internet usage has a positive long-term impact, while broadband shows no clear effect, suggesting that infrastructure alone is not sufficient without industry adaptation. Education indicators negatively affect tourism revenue, due to workforce shifts. In the short run, both broadband and internet usage have negative effects, reflecting delays in digital adoption and changing consumer behaviour. The overall negative trend in tourism revenue points to structural challenges that call for targeted policy responses.

Contribution – This study provides an in-depth analysis of the relationship between digitalization, education, and tourism in CEE economies, contributing to both academic discussions and policy development. The findings challenge the assumption that digitalization inherently boosts tourism growth, demonstrating that strategic adaptation is necessary for digital infrastructure to generate positive economic effects.

Keywords Digitalization, Tourism Revenue, Education, ARDL Model

SUSTAINABLE SYNERGY: IMPLEMENTING TQM FOR RESILIENT TOURIST DESTINATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to understand the application of Total Quality Management (TQM) in achieving high customer satisfaction within the tourism sector. In this field, TQM is implemented at both the destination and organizational levels to create a synergy that increases sustainability. By examining the relationship between tourist destinations and organizations, the paper highlights the importance of collaboration in responding to market trends, evolving visitor expectations, and environmental challenges.

Methodology – This study is based on a systematic literature review, analyzing 19 research papers published between 2007 and 2024. The literature was sourced from major academic databases, including Elsevier, Springer, ResearchGate, Scopus, MDPI, and Google Scholar. The selected studies are categorized into two groups: those focusing on TQM in tourism organizations and those examining its application in tourism destinations.

Findings – The findings indicate that TQM leads to improved business performance, higher customer satisfaction, lower operational costs, and stronger market positioning. Effective quality management is essential for achieving a competitive advantage while ensuring sustainability. The study also highlights the need for technological integration, visitor feedback mechanisms, and continuous staff training.

Contribution – This paper enriches existing literature by providing a systematic review of TQM applications in tourism, emphasizing sustainability. It offers practical recommendations for tourism managers on improving service quality and gaining a competitive edge. The research underscores the importance of a well-integrated and collaborative approach in ensuring long-term resilience and sustainability in the tourism sector.

Keywords TQM, sustainable tourism, tourist destinations, tourism organizations, quality management

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN MONTENEGRO'S HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM INDUSTRY

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper primarily serves as a review of current global trends and academic literature on the application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in tourism, contextualized within Montenegro's tourism sector. In addition to the literature synthesis, the paper includes original insights gathered through a descriptive survey that explores stakeholder perceptions of AI's potential impact, benefits, and barriers in the local tourism context.

Methodology – In order to evaluate the significance and potential application of AI in Montenegro's tourism development, a survey was conducted using a Google questionnaire. The survey targeted various stakeholders involved in Montenegro's tourism offerings, including hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, local tourist organizations, and others.

Findings – Based on survey responses, there is a well-substantiated need for AI adoption in destination promotion and management, as well as its importance in enhancing the user experience. The findings highlight the necessity of raising awareness among tourism stakeholders in Montenegro regarding AI's importance in the tourism sector. Although the role of AI in the global tourism industry is recognized, its application in Montenegro has not yet received adequate attention.

Contribution – The contribution of this work lies in raising awareness within the tourism industry about the role, possibilities, and importance of AI in the sector. The research also provides practical examples of AI applications within Montenegro's tourism industry. Concrete solutions could include: intelligent chatbots offering personalized recommendations to tourists, virtual assistants providing real-time support, and enhanced management of tourism infrastructure through various digital tools that offer real-time information on the status and occupancy of tourist and support infrastructure.

Keywords Artificial Intelligence, Tourism, Montenegro, Hospitality

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL AND DIGITAL LEISURE ACTIVITIES IN AIRLINE CHOICE FOR LONG-HAUL FLIGHTS

Abstract

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Purpose - This study aims to explore how traditional and digital leisure activities offered by airlines shape the flight experience and influence airline choice among long-haul passengers.

Methodology - Designed using a phenomenological approach and qualitative methodology, the study employs in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 participants selected through purposive sampling based on their experience with long-haul (8-16 hours) air travel. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software.

Findings - As a result of the coding process, six key themes emerged: "Passengers' Leisure Activities on Long-Haul Flights", "Expectations from Airlines for Long-Haul Flights", "Reasons for Choosing an Airline for Long-Haul Flights", "Problems Experienced on Long-Haul Flights", "Activities Offered by Airlines to Passengers" and "Advantages and Disadvantages of Long-Haul Flight Activities". Within the theme of "Problems Experienced on Long-Haul Flights," the category of "lack or insufficiency of activities" emerged as a significant concern among participants. This issue was highlighted as an important factor affecting overall passenger experience. "Digital Activities" stood out as a key factor under both "Expectations from Airlines for Long-Haul Flights" and "Reasons for Choosing an Airline for Long-Haul Flights." These findings suggest that airlines should prioritize improving in-flight entertainment, especially digital options, to increase passenger satisfaction and market competitiveness.

Contribution - This study contributes to the field of aviation and tourism by providing an in-depth understanding of how traditional and digital leisure activities influence long-haul passengers' flight experiences and airline choices. By adopting a phenomenological approach, it offers valuable qualitative insights into passenger expectations, perceived gaps in in-flight entertainment, and factors influencing airline choice. The research expands existing literature by emphasizing the growing importance of digital activities in enhancing passenger satisfaction. It highlights the inadequacy of current in-flight entertainment offerings and underscores the necessity for airlines to innovate and diversify digital entertainment options. Additionally, the study provides practical implications for airline management and marketing strategies, suggesting that investment in high-quality, diverse entertainment services can enhance the overall flight experience, foster passenger loyalty, and influence passengers' airline selection criteria. Finally, this study provides a basis for future research on the changing role of leisure activities on long-haul flights from the passenger perspective.

Keywords Long-Haul Flights, Traditional Leisure Activities, Digital Leisure Activities, Airline Choice

SUSTAINABLE HOSPITALITY: HOW GREEN TRANSFORMATION ENHANCES BRAND PERCEPTION AND REDUCES FOOD WASTE

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Abstract

Purpose - A significant problem for hotels in various countries is the large food waste in restaurants and bars. This is especially evident in hotels that operate according to the “allinclusive” concept but also applies to every hotel where the service occurs according to the “buffet” system. Overall, hospitality is estimated to generate 18% of all annual food waste, while 8 to 20% of total food costs are associated with overproduction, errors in cooking, damaged products, and leftovers on plates. This lack of “sustainable thinking” leads not only to unjustified financial losses on food products but also to a negative impact on the environment, which is associated with the emission of greenhouse gases. This research aims to determine how reducing food waste will contribute to sustainable development toward green business transformation in hospitality. Research question: How does the transition to sustainable development and environmental responsibility impact the hotel brand’s perception? Hypotheses: The transition to sustainable development and environmental responsibility positively changes the hotel brand’s perception.

Methodology - The study utilized both secondary and primary data. Secondary sources included publicly available hotel data, financial information, and prior research studies, analyzed through synthesis and generalization methods. Primary data is gathered from focus group interviews with hoteliers in Ukraine, Germany, Turkey, and the USA.

Findings - The research confirmed that the transition to sustainable development and environmental responsibility will positively affect consumer loyalty to the brand and, as a result, will strengthen the brand’s image and communication effectiveness. In addition, the research demonstrated the differences between the obtained results in different hospitality markets – Ukraine, Germany, Turkey, and the USA. The findings are used to formulate research and business implications. It is assumed that using practical recommendations according to the obtained results will provide an opportunity for hospitality enterprises worldwide to transfer their business to a qualitatively new level according to sustainable development. Further research could focus on developing and evaluating effective strategies to reduce food waste, the impact of cultural and economic factors on sustainable development in different regions, and the assessment of economic benefits and the effect of such practices on consumer loyalty and social responsibility of the hospitality business. Particular attention could be paid to innovative methods for monitoring and evaluating environmental initiatives.

Contribution - This research contributes to the understanding of sustainable practices within the hospitality industry, particularly focusing on the reduction of food waste as a driver for green business transformation. By investigating the relationship between sustainability efforts and hotel brand perception, this study provides valuable insights into how environmental responsibility influences consumer loyalty and brand image. The findings offer a comparative analysis of hospitality markets in Ukraine, Germany, Turkey, and the USA, highlighting regional differences in the implementation and impact of sustainable practices. Additionally, this research contributes practical recommendations for hoteliers aiming to improve operational efficiency, reduce food waste, and enhance their brand’s reputation through sustainable development. Ultimately, the study supports the broader adoption of sustainable practices in the global hospitality industry, contributing to both environmental sustainability and improved business performance.

Keywords Sustainable hospitality, green transformations, food waste, brand perception

REIMAGINING TRAVEL: ADDRESSING FATIGUE IN MODERN TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

Abstract

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Purpose - The rapid advancement of technology has led to significant developments in the tourism industry, which operates within a highly dynamic structure. Technology plays a crucial role in travelers' experiences by facilitating trip planning, navigation, and social interaction through various digital tools. While these advancements provide convenience and enhance engagement, they can also introduce psychological and physical pressures that may negatively impact travelers' well-being. This study examines the role of technology in travel fatigue, exploring both its benefits and potential drawbacks. By identifying how digital tools contribute to or alleviate tourist fatigue, the study aims to generate insights relevant to tourism management, travel behavior, and overall travel experience.

Methodology - A qualitative research approach was adopted, utilizing an open-ended questionnaire to assess the impact of technology on travel fatigue. Twenty participants, selected through purposive sampling, were required to have prior international travel experience. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, allowing for detailed personal insights. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns in the perceived benefits and drawbacks of technological applications such as navigation tools, social media, and wearable fitness devices.

Findings - Findings reveal that technology has a dual effect on travel fatigue. On one hand, digital tools alleviate physical fatigue through navigation apps and smart wearables that enhance movement efficiency and track health metrics. Additionally, social media engagement can serve as a motivational factor for continued exploration. On the other hand, the pressures associated with constant digital engagement, including the need for continuous online presence and decision-making fatigue, can contribute to psychological exhaustion.

Contribution - This study advances existing literature by offering a holistic framework for understanding travel fatigue in the digital era. Unlike prior research that focuses on isolated aspects of digital engagement, this study provides a comprehensive evaluation of how various technological interactions shape travel experiences. The findings offer practical implications for tourism management by informing strategies for sustainable travel experiences that integrate technology while safeguarding traveler well-being. Furthermore, insights from this research can guide technology developers in designing more adaptable and less intrusive travel applications. Future studies could expand on these findings through quantitative analysis, longitudinal studies, or experimental approaches to further explore the complex relationship between technology use and travel fatigue.

Keywords Travel fatigue; Tourist experience; Technology; Tourist behavior

CULTURAL AND CREATIVE TOURISM AS CATALYSTS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE HUNGARIAN-SLOVENIAN BORDERLANDS

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper, in conjunction with the goals of CROCUS project, sets out to explore the nexus of cultural and creative tourism with slow tourism in the cross-border area between Hungary and Slovenia. This research investigates the untapped potential of integrating cultural heritage and sustainability, addressing the need for rural development in remote areas. The paper focuses on the specific challenges and benefits inherent in developing tourism initiatives in these regions, and seeks to provide insights that can help promote economic growth while preserving local culture and environment.

Methodology – A mixed-method approach was employed; the primary research including structured interviews with eight stakeholders, as well as a Delphi method survey that garnered responses from 22 experts in the field. The research questions aimed to foster a more comprehensive understanding of rural development, with a particular focus on (RQ1) identifying the primary challenges and benefits associated with cultural and creative tourism in rural and remote areas, and (RQ2) how these can be effectively adapted to the Hungarian-Slovenian border region. The framework for this so called living lab will be shaped by these findings, showcasing a participative approach.

Findings – The research revealed significant insights into the essential role of networking and cooperation among local stakeholders. The experts' opinion emphasised the necessity for long-term thinking and networking in tourism development, with a particular focus on community-based models that engage local ageing populations. Key challenges identified included limited resources and infrastructure, while benefits such as enhanced cultural identity and increased awareness of sustainable practices were also noted. Suggestions for future research include a deeper exploration of specific community-led initiatives such as leisure-focused parks, local markets, art camps, environmentally-friendly gastronomy, and small-scaled cultural events.

Contribution – The present paper makes a significant contribution to the field of sustainable tourism in rural contexts, particularly in the less explored border region between Hungary and Slovenia. It offers practical guidelines for policymakers and local stakeholders on fostering cultural and creative tourism while ensuring its sustainability. The work addresses the social dimensions of tourism by advocating for participatory approaches that empower local communities, thereby promoting a shared sense of ownership over cultural resources. The paper also outlines a preliminary living lab framework, paving the way for further research and collaborative efforts aimed at enhancing the region's tourism potential.

Keywords cultural and creative tourism, rural development, boarderlands, social dimensions
