

CREATIVE TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Purpose: The main purpose of the paper is to analyze a considerable number of articles and books published at the beginning of the 21st century on creative tourism. The authors aim to identify the main research trends in this field, focusing on the evolution of the concept, its differences from traditional cultural tourism and the management modalities of this type of tourism.

Design/methodology/approach: The methodological approach is qualitative, based on the analysis of specialized literature. The authors resorted to critical and comparative analysis of academic works published after 2000. The article is located at the intersection of creative management and tourism management. The objectives are achieved by structuring the information in three research directions: the staged evolution of the concept, the comparative analysis of forms of tourism and the identification of the pillars of creative management.

Findings: The analysis highlighted three major findings. Creative tourism has evolved in stages, from simple learning activities, to relational networks and co-creation of experiences. Unlike cultural tourism, creative tourism is active, focused on personal development and intangible resources. Effective management in this field must include co-creation, local community empowerment, cultural integration and sustainability.

Research limitations/implications: The study is limited to the analysis of the specialized literature (secondary research), without including a primary research component (interviews or new case studies). The authors envisage for future research the identification of specific success factors for rural destinations (leadership, local entrepreneurship), thus suggesting the need to explore these variables in diverse geographical contexts.

Practical implications: The research provides clear directions for the business environment. Romanian tourism entrepreneurs should adopt these trends (co-creation, practical workshops) to modernize and improve their businesses. Implementing creative tourism can lead to

economic sustainability by directly supporting local artists and artisans. Moving from simply "contemplating" tourist attractions to offering interactive.

Originality/value: The originality of the article lies in the coherent synthesis of the concepts of "creative management" applied in tourism, providing a structured framework for understanding the transition from passive to active consumption. The paper is useful to researchers and students for theoretical foundation and to entrepreneurs as a strategic guide for innovating tourism products.

Keywords: creative tourism, creative tourism management, definitions, differences, trends, 21st century.

Category of the paper: viewpoint, literature and general review.

1. Introduction

Creative management is an advertising, design, and entertainment management practice consisting of guiding and overseeing creative processes within an organization or project, combining creativity with strategic planning to achieve innovative outcomes (Xu, Rickards, 2007; Xu, 2013). It includes key elements such as leadership, problem-solving, project management, and vision setting.

Creative tourism management builds upon these principles and refers to designing and managing tourism experiences that emphasize active participation, creativity, and cultural engagement (Richards, Wilson, 2007; Richards, 2010; Richards, Marques, 2012; Richards, 2012, 2015). It focuses on preserving cultural identity, enriching tourist experiences, and fostering meaningful connections between visitors and local communities.

In recent years, creative tourism has gained increasing attention in both academic research and tourism practice, particularly as a response to the limitations of mass and cultural tourism.

However, despite the growing body of literature, several conceptual and methodological limitations can be identified. First, the existing studies are largely descriptive and fragmented, offering multiple definitions of creative tourism that emphasize different aspects such as participation, creativity, or cultural immersion. This lack of conceptual clarity limits the development of a unified theoretical framework.

Second, a significant part of the literature adopts a normative perspective, presenting creative tourism as inherently beneficial, while insufficient attention is given to potential risks, such as cultural commodification or superficial tourist engagement.

Third, there is a lack of integrated approaches to creative tourism management that combine co-creation, community empowerment, cultural integration, and sustainability into a coherent framework. Moreover, empirical research remains limited, particularly in emerging markets such as Central and Eastern Europe.

Finally, insufficient attention has been paid to performance measurement, key success factors, and the role of innovation and digitalization in shaping creative tourism development.

In response to these limitations, the aim of this paper is to analyze the evolution of the concept of creative tourism, identify the differences between cultural and creative tourism, and examine the key principles of creative tourism management in order to outline the main research trends in this field.

2. Material and Method

The methodology used is qualitative, based on content analysis of secondary sources.

To ensure methodological rigor, the literature review was conducted as a structured and transparent process inspired by the principles of a systematic literature review. The procedure consisted of the following stages:

1. Definition of the research scope.

The review focused on publications addressing creative tourism, creative tourism management, and the evolution of tourism concepts in the 21st century.

2. Identification of data sources.

Scientific publications were collected from major academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Additional sources included books and reports from international organizations (e.g., UNESCO).

3. Search strategy.

The search process was based on a combination of keywords such as: “creative tourism”, “creative tourism management”, “cultural vs creative tourism”, “tourism innovation”, and “co-creation in tourism”.

4. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The selection of publications was based on the following criteria:

- publications in English,
- peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference papers,
- works published between 2000 and 2023,
- direct relevance to the concept and management of creative tourism.

Publications not directly related to tourism or lacking scientific rigor were excluded.

5. Selection process.

The initial search yielded a broad set of publications, which were subsequently screened based on titles and abstracts. In the next step, full-text analysis was conducted to identify the most relevant sources.

6. Data analysis and synthesis.

The selected literature was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The findings were categorized into three main research areas:

- (1) the evolution of the concept of creative tourism,

- (2) the comparison between cultural and creative tourism,
 - (3) the principles and practices of creative tourism management.
7. Interpretation and synthesis of results.

The final stage involved synthesizing the findings and identifying key trends, theoretical approaches, and practical implications for tourism management.

The initial search resulted in over 100 publications. After screening and applying inclusion criteria, 38 key sources were selected for in-depth analysis. The selection was based on relevance, scientific quality, publication date (2000–2023), and theoretical contribution to the field of creative tourism.

The literature selection process is presented in Figure 1, illustrating the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and final inclusion of sources.

Literature Selection Process (PRISMA-style)

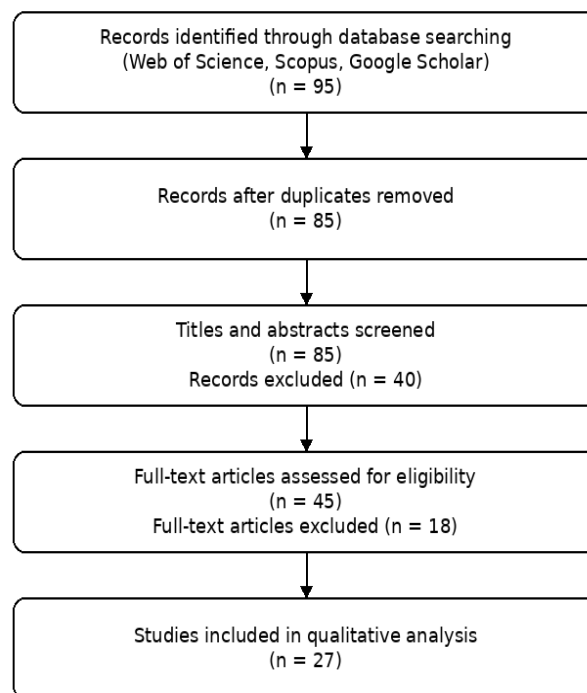


Figure 1. Literature selection process (PRISMA-style).

Source: Own study.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the literature on creative tourism management reveals three main research dimensions: the evolution of the concept, the distinction between cultural and creative tourism, and the principles of creative tourism management. However, beyond descriptive categorization, a more analytical perspective highlights important patterns and relationships.

3.1. Evolution of the concept of creative tourism

The evolution of creative tourism reflects a broader shift from passive consumption toward active and participatory experiences. Early definitions emphasized learning activities and skill development, while later approaches incorporated co-creation and relational networks.

This progression, summarized in four stages, indicates a transition from product-oriented tourism to experience-based and network-driven models. In particular, the emergence of “creative tourism 4.0” highlights the growing importance of social interaction, collaboration, and value co-creation.

From a critical perspective, however, this linear evolution may oversimplify the diversity of tourism practices. In reality, different stages often coexist, depending on the level of destination development and local capabilities. Therefore, the concept of creative tourism should be understood as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon rather than a strictly sequential process.

3.2. Cultural tourism versus creative tourism

The comparison between cultural and creative tourism reveals a fundamental shift in the logic of value creation. Cultural tourism is primarily based on passive consumption of tangible heritage, whereas creative tourism emphasizes active participation, intangible resources, and personal transformation.

This distinction suggests that creative tourism aligns more closely with contemporary consumer expectations, particularly the demand for authentic and personalized experiences. Moreover, intangible resources such as creativity, narratives, and local knowledge are more flexible and scalable than traditional cultural assets.

However, the dichotomy between cultural and creative tourism should not be overstated. In practice, these forms often overlap, and many tourism experiences combine elements of both. Furthermore, the emphasis on creativity may lead to the commodification of culture if not managed carefully.

Therefore, instead of treating these concepts as mutually exclusive, it is more appropriate to consider creative tourism as an extension or evolution of cultural tourism, rather than its replacement.

3.3. Creative tourism management

The analysis identifies four key pillars of creative tourism management: co-creation, community empowerment, cultural integration, and sustainability.

Co-creation represents a shift from service delivery to experience design, where tourists actively participate in value creation. This approach enhances engagement and satisfaction but requires higher organizational capabilities and flexibility.

Community empowerment plays a central role in ensuring that local stakeholders benefit from tourism development. However, the literature often assumes positive outcomes without critically addressing potential challenges, such as unequal distribution of benefits or limited local capacity.

Cultural integration strengthens the authenticity of tourism experiences, but it also raises concerns about cultural appropriation and the loss of traditional meanings when adapted for tourism purposes.

Sustainability is frequently presented as an inherent feature of creative tourism, yet empirical evidence supporting this claim remains limited. In many cases, sustainability depends more on management practices than on the tourism model itself.

Overall, the effectiveness of creative tourism management depends on the ability to balance these four pillars while adapting to local conditions. This highlights the need for more integrated and context-sensitive management frameworks.

3.4. Synthesis and implications

The findings suggest that creative tourism represents a shift toward more interactive, experience-based, and knowledge-driven tourism models. However, its development is not uniform and depends on contextual factors such as destination characteristics, local resources, and institutional capacity.

From a theoretical perspective, the study highlights the need for more integrated frameworks that combine different dimensions of creative tourism management.

From a practical perspective, tourism stakeholders should focus on developing capabilities related to co-creation, stakeholder collaboration, and innovation, while avoiding the risks of cultural commodification and superficial experience design.

Conceptual framework of creative tourism management

Based on the literature analysis, a conceptual framework of creative tourism management is proposed (Figure 2). The model integrates four key pillars: co-creation, community empowerment, cultural integration, and sustainability.

Co-creation constitutes the central element of the model, as it transforms tourists from passive consumers into active participants in experience creation. This process is supported by community empowerment, which ensures the involvement and benefits of local stakeholders.

Cultural integration enables the embedding of tourism experiences within local traditions and heritage, enhancing authenticity and meaningful engagement. At the same time, sustainability acts as a cross-cutting dimension, ensuring that tourism development is economically viable, socially inclusive, and environmentally responsible.

The interaction between these elements leads to the creation of innovative and experience-based tourism products, which contribute to the competitiveness and long-term development of tourism destinations.

The proposed conceptual framework is presented in Figure 2 and illustrates the relationships between key dimensions of creative tourism management.

Conceptual Framework of Creative Tourism Management

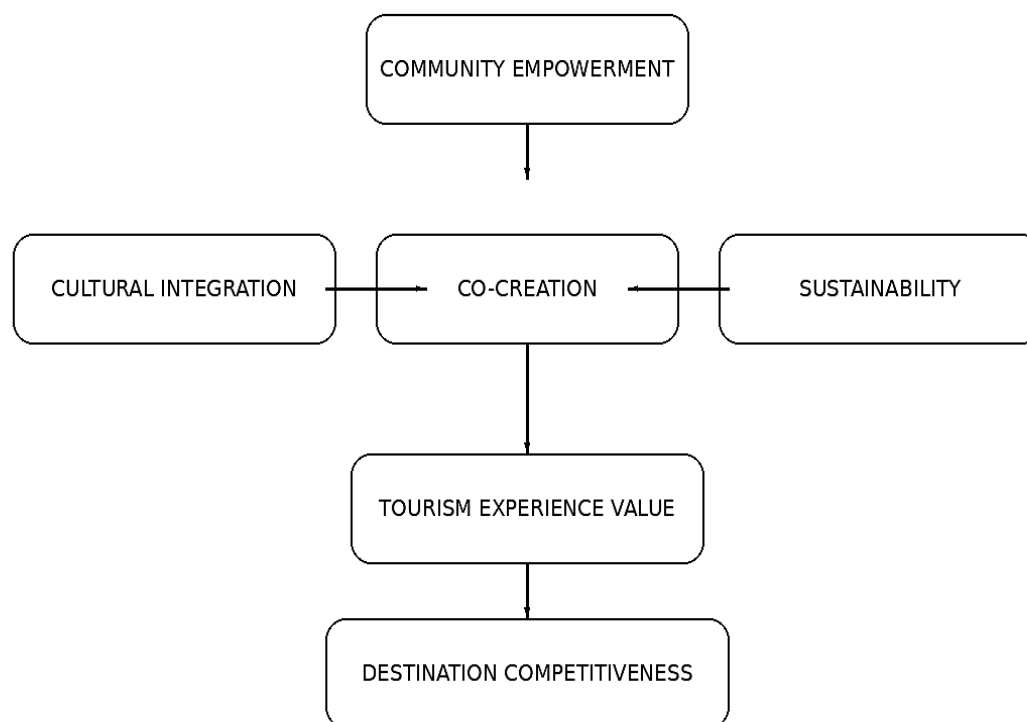


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of creative tourism management.

Source: Own study.

4. Summary

This study aimed to analyze the evolution of the concept of creative tourism, identify the key differences between cultural and creative tourism, and examine the main principles of creative tourism management. Based on a structured literature review, several important conclusions can be drawn.

First, the findings confirm that creative tourism represents a significant shift from passive, product-oriented consumption toward active, experience-based and participatory models. This transformation reflects broader changes in tourist expectations and highlights the growing importance of co-creation and personalization in tourism experiences.

Second, the study demonstrates that creative tourism should not be treated as a separate category replacing cultural tourism, but rather as its extension and evolution. The relationship between these two forms of tourism is complementary rather than substitutive.

Third, the analysis identifies four key pillars of creative tourism management: co-creation, community empowerment, cultural integration, and sustainability. Their interaction forms the basis for developing innovative and competitive tourism products, as illustrated in the proposed conceptual framework.

The main theoretical contribution of this study lies in the integration of dispersed literature into a coherent analytical framework. The proposed model organizes key dimensions of creative tourism management and highlights their interdependencies, contributing to a more structured understanding of this concept.

Furthermore, the study provides a critical perspective on existing research by identifying conceptual inconsistencies and methodological limitations, thus extending the current discourse beyond purely descriptive approaches.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, it is based exclusively on secondary data, which limits the ability to empirically verify the identified relationships. Second, the selection of literature, although structured, may not fully capture all relevant publications, particularly those published in languages other than English. Third, the proposed conceptual framework has not been empirically tested, which limits its applicability in specific contexts.

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