

Sustainable Cultural Heritage Tourism: Exploring Tourist Perceptions and the Digital Dimension

Field of Study : Management, Marketing and Consumer Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

The concept of sustainability and sustainable tourism has not received appropriate attention in previous research in terms of tourists' understanding. Despite a recent increase in interest in this topic, prior studies have predominantly focused on the supply side of the tourism industry and assumed that all consumers and stakeholders possess a shared understanding of these concepts. Although tourists have a basic idea of what sustainability means, they struggle to apply this concept to the tourism sector where both the environmental emergency and technological revolution have triggered significant changes, such as, for example, raising awareness among travelers about the significance of preserving cultural heritage. The relevance of sustainability at a social level has led to the implementation of sustainable practices in accommodations, thus creating sustainable tourism. This research project delves into applying sustainable tourism principles to cultural tourism, emphasizing the broader preservation of cultural heritage alongside environmental concerns. In fact, sustainable cultural tourism aims to protect cultural resources, historical sites, and traditions, ensuring they're enjoyed by future generations in equal or improved conditions.

Therefore, the project has the objective to explore how tourists perceive sustainability in cultural tourism and the role of digital technologies in promoting sustainable practices. We seek to understand how digital marketing and technology can influence cultural tourists' decisions and encourage more sustainable practices. Ultimately, our aim is to contribute to the development of a conscious and sustainable cultural tourism approach, ensuring that cultural heritage is preserved and shared for future generations to enjoy optimally.



Research aims and methodology

This research project explores sustainable cultural tourism, emphasising the preservation of cultural heritage and its importance alongside environmental sustainability. It investigates how tourists perceive sustainability in cultural tourism and how digital technologies can promote sustainable practices, such as mobile apps informing visitors about cultural sites. In fact, digital marketing campaigns raise awareness about preserving cultural heritage. Understanding consumer behaviour in this context is a key aspect.

Ultimately, the goal is to contribute to conscious and sustainable cultural tourism, preserving cultural heritage for future generations to enjoy optimal.

Moreover, this research aims to discover through the analysis of the destination image perceived by the visitor, whether tourists perceive the sustainable character of accommodations that are classified as such. The goal is to propose a framework to illustrate the current understanding of the concept by tourists and advocates for the creation of alternative perspectives and strategies to promote sustainable tourism more effectively. Ultimately, these efforts will lead to better-informed and conscious consumer.

To explore sustainable cultural tourism, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the integration of environmental sustainability, this study will adopt a mixed-methods approach. This approach combines qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of tourists' perceptions, consumer behavior, and the effectiveness of digital technologies in promoting sustainable practices. This research follows these steps:

1. Literature Review

- **Objective:** To establish a theoretical foundation by reviewing existing research on sustainable cultural tourism, cultural heritage preservation, environmental sustainability, and the role of digital technologies in tourism.
- **Method:** Systematic review of academic journals, books, and reports to identify key themes, concepts, and gaps in the current knowledge.

2. Qualitative Research: Sentiment analysis

- **Objective:** To analyse tourists' attitudes and feelings toward sustainability in cultural tourism and digital technologies through sentiment analysis of user-generated content.
- **Data Sources, Data Scraping and Data Analysis:** Social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Instagram), travel review websites (e.g., TripAdvisor), and online forums where tourists discuss their experiences related to cultural tourism.
- **Outcome:** The sentiment analysis will reveal tourists' overall sentiment and key emotional drivers related to sustainable cultural tourism, providing insights into how they perceive sustainability efforts and the effectiveness of digital tools in promoting these practices.

3. Quantitative Research: Surveys

- **Objective:** To measure tourists' perceptions of sustainability in cultural tourism, the effectiveness of digital technologies in promoting sustainable practices, and the perceived destination image.
- **Sample, Data Collection and Data Analysis:** A large, diverse sample of tourists who have visited cultural destinations and stayed in sustainable accommodations will be surveyed with the aim to provide an overview of tourists' perceptions



Relevance and added-value of the proposed research in relation to the current state of knowledge

The proposed research on sustainable cultural tourism is highly relevant and adds significant value to the existing body of knowledge. In recent years, the field of cultural tourism has seen a growing focus on sustainability, driven by the need to balance cultural heritage preservation with environmental protection (Hunter, 2008; Payal, 2021). However, while much has been written about environmental sustainability, the integration of cultural sustainability—ensuring that cultural heritage is preserved and promoted alongside ecological efforts—remains underexplored (Cloarec, 2023; Gulati, 2021).

This study addresses this gap by investigating how tourists perceive sustainability within the context of cultural tourism. Understanding tourists' perceptions is crucial because it directly influences their behavior and decision-making processes (Wu et al., 2022). By exploring this aspect, the research provides valuable insights into consumer behavior, which is essential for developing effective strategies to promote sustainable cultural tourism.

The research is focused on digital technologies, such as mobile apps and digital marketing campaigns, and introduces a modern and practical approach to sustainability. In an increasingly digital world, leveraging technology to inform and educate tourists about the importance of cultural heritage preservation is a timely and innovative solution. This approach not only enhances the visitor experience but also encourages responsible and sustainable practices among tourists.

Moreover, the research's emphasis on the destination image and tourists' perceptions of sustainable accommodations contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence consumer choices. By proposing a framework that illustrates the current understanding of sustainability among consumers, the study paves the way for the creation of alternative perspectives and strategies that can more effectively promote sustainable tourism.

Ultimately, the research aims to contribute to the development of a more conscious and informed tourist, who is aware of the importance of preserving cultural heritage for future generations. By addressing both cultural and environmental sustainability, this study offers a comprehensive approach to sustainable tourism that is essential for the long-term preservation of cultural heritage.

Interdisciplinary nature of the research together with the alignment with the CHORAL programme and complementarity expertise of the teams

This proposal goes in line with the Culture Heritage Hub of Enhancement and Dissemination of cultural and natural heritage, more specific with tourism and valorisation, communication and digitisation and how this might affect in heritage management.

The distinct yet complementary focuses of the two team members are essential for the success of this research.

1. **Supervisor (Digitalisation and Methodologies Focus):** The director's expertise in digitalisation and advanced methodologies is crucial for integrating cutting-edge technology into the study. Their focus on digital tools, such as mobile apps and digital marketing strategies, aligns with the need to innovate and modernize sustainable cultural tourism practices. By leveraging their knowledge, the research can effectively explore how digital technologies can promote sustainable practices and enhance tourist experiences. Additionally, the director's methodological skills ensure that the research design is rigorous and capable of producing reliable and actionable insights.



2. **Co-Supervisor (Management and Consumer Behaviour):** The second team member brings a strong focus on management and consumer behavior, which is vital for assessing the effectiveness of sustainable practices from an operational standpoint. This expertise complements the director's focus creating the ground of the research in measurable outcomes and statistical analysis. This approach ensures that the research not only explores innovative digital solutions but also evaluates their impact on consumer behavior and destination image through robust quantitative methods. Their management focus also helps in understanding how sustainable practices can be integrated into the broader strategic goals of tourism organisations.

Justification for Complementarity: The combination of these two perspectives creates a well-rounded research team. The director's focus on innovation through digitalisation ensures that the research remains forward-thinking and relevant in an increasingly digital world. At the same time, the second member's emphasis on management and consumer behavior provides a practical and evidence-based foundation, ensuring that the research results can be applied in real-world settings. Together, they offer a comprehensive approach that balances theoretical innovation with practical implementation, ultimately contributing to more effective and sustainable cultural tourism practices.

Output plan including publication and dissemination activities

3-Year Research Plan with Publication and Dissemination Activities

Objective: This 3-year plan outlines the research activities, publication strategies, and dissemination efforts to ensure the findings on sustainable cultural tourism are widely shared with both academic and industry stakeholders.

Year 1: Research Foundation and Initial Data Collection

1. Literature Review and Framework Development

- Conduct an in-depth literature review to establish the theoretical foundation.
- Develop an initial research framework that integrates digitalization, methodologies, management, and quantitative data.
- **Output:** Publish a review article in a peer-reviewed journal focusing on the state of sustainable cultural tourism, emphasizing gaps in the integration of digital technologies.

2. Qualitative Research - Sentiment Analysis

- Perform sentiment analysis on social media and travel review platforms to gauge tourists' attitudes toward sustainability in cultural tourism.
- Identify key themes and emotions related to sustainable practices.
- **Output:** Present findings at a national conference on tourism or digital humanities.

3. Quantitative Survey Design

- Develop and pilot an online survey to assess tourists' perceptions of sustainable practices, digital tools, and accommodations.
- **Output:** Publish a research note or methodology paper detailing the survey design and preliminary findings in a relevant academic journal.

4. Case Study Selection and Initial Data Collection

- Identify cultural heritage sites and tourism destinations implementing digital tools for sustainability.
- Begin collecting data on the impact of these technologies.
- **Output:** Share initial case study findings in industry reports or white papers, targeting tourism organizations and policymakers.



Year 2: Data Collection and Preliminary Analysis (Torino mobility)

1. Full-Scale Survey and Data Collection

- Deploy the online survey to a larger sample of tourists and collect data on their perceptions and behaviors.
- Conduct interviews with stakeholders (e.g., tourism operators, cultural heritage managers) to supplement quantitative data.
- **Output:** Present interim results at an international conference, such as the International Conference on Sustainable Tourism.

2. In-Depth Case Study Analysis

- Complete data collection for case studies and analyze the effectiveness of digital technologies in promoting sustainability.
- **Output:** Submit a journal article to a top-tier tourism or sustainability journal, focusing on the real-world impact of digital tools in sustainable tourism.

3. Framework Refinement and Model Testing

- Refine the research framework based on the data analysis and begin testing models that link digitalization, management practices, and sustainable outcomes.
- **Output:** Publish a conceptual framework paper in a high-impact journal and share a preprint on an academic repository (e.g., SSRN or arXiv) for early dissemination.

Year 3: Final Analysis, Publications, and Dissemination

1. Synthesis of Findings and Final Framework Development

- Integrate findings from sentiment analysis, surveys, and case studies to finalize the research framework.
- Conduct a comprehensive analysis to provide actionable recommendations for promoting sustainable cultural tourism.
- **Output:** Submit a comprehensive research paper that synthesizes the study's findings to a leading journal in tourism management or digital transformation.

2. Stakeholder Workshops and Industry Engagement

- Organize workshops with tourism industry professionals, cultural heritage managers, and policymakers to disseminate findings and recommendations.
- Develop practical guidelines and toolkits based on the research to help industry stakeholders implement sustainable practices.
- **Output:** Publish industry-focused reports and toolkits, and distribute them through tourism associations, online platforms, and networks.

3. Final Dissemination and Future Research Directions

- Present final research findings at major international conferences (e.g., Enter conference).
- Identify future research directions based on gaps identified during the study.
- **Output:** Publish a final summary paper or book chapter outlining the research's contributions to sustainable cultural tourism and its implications for future studies.

Ongoing Dissemination Activities Throughout the 3 Years

- **Academic Publications:** Aim to publish at least 3 peer-reviewed journal articles over the course of the research, targeting both tourism and digital innovation journals.
- **Conference Presentations:** Present findings at both national and international conferences at least once year from the second year of PhD.
- **Workshops and Webinars:** Host annual workshops and webinars to engage with industry stakeholders, ensuring that the research has a practical impact.



- **Social Media and Digital Platforms:** Regularly update research progress on social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, LinkedIn) and maintain a project blog or website to disseminate findings in a more accessible format.
- **Collaboration with Industry Partners:** Collaborate with tourism boards, cultural organizations, and technology providers to ensure the research findings are implemented in practice.

Evaluation and Feedback

- **Annual Review Meetings:** Conduct annual review meetings with the research team, external advisors, and stakeholders to assess progress, refine the research plan, and adjust dissemination strategies as needed.
- **Feedback Loops:** Collect feedback from academic peers, industry partners, and conference attendees to continuously improve the research and its practical applications.

This 3-year plan ensures that the research is not only academically rigorous but also widely disseminated and impactful in the real world, fostering sustainable cultural tourism practices across different sectors.