



Exploring tourists' perceptions and influencing factors of creative tourism in Europe

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Abstract: The emergence of co-creative interactions between tourists and touristic activities has extended in Europe generating increased interest, driven by contemporary trends in tourism emphasizing meaningful, authentic experiences and direct engagement with culture and local communities. Our paper aims to reveal insights and nuances in tourists' perceptions of creative destinations in Europe. The findings are based on a literature review on creative tourism and a qualitative methodology of two focus groups carried out with 20 people in total from 13 countries from Europe, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Spain. Within the focus groups there were explored the levels of understanding on the creative tourism concept, European destinations associated with creative tourism, influencing factors that stimulate engagement in creative tourism experiences in Europe as well future perspectives of creative tourism evolving in Europe. A diversity of opinions have emerged in consideration of creative tourism trends and patterns and the idea of a 'one-size-fits-all' model resulted to be particularly inappropriate in terms of creative tourism perceptions and experiences. Our analysis highlights several directions for further information development on the introduction of creative experiences into tourism developments.

Keywords: creative tourism, Europe, tourists' perceptions, creative experiences

Introduction

The co-creative interactions between tourists and local activities has been expanding across Europe, generating contemporary tourism trends that prioritize meaningful and authentic experiences, as well as direct engagement with local culture and communities, as tourists are increasingly seeking opportunities to actively participate in more enriching travel experiences.

The positive impact of the development of creative tourism has been felt by tourists as a result of the interaction with the inhabitants of the visited regions and the exchange of values between them. Moreover, their positive memories associated with the experience of creative tourism can facilitate an attachment to that place that later on can also be recommended to other visitors (Wei et al., 2023). Creative

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tourism has had also a positive impact on tourists that spend time in less touristic places, but which prefer to live in residents' houses, learning their language and cultural traditions and integrating in the day-to-day life of residents (Kennett, 2002). Creative tourism can be associated with different hobbies of tourists related to gastronomy, textiles, ceramics or music and dance. Therefore, the main actors involved in these activities are local enterprises, which offer tourists the opportunity to do small tours in the countryside to discover the technique of making local authentic products, thus experiencing local culture and community life (Centre for the Promotion of Imports from developing countries [CBI], 2021). Another positive aspect of creative tourism is the social connectivity, where there can also be volunteer programs oriented to some forms of creativity that can help community development. In the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the number of digital nomads increased, creative tourism was for many people a solution, combining work and agreement activities, developing co-working spaces and living labs.

The importance of culture is also recognized by the European Union (EU) as part of the touristic experience in Europe, the EU being at the same time an important destination for cultural tourism, through its rich tourist heritage (archaeological sites, museums, historic cities, gastronomy, music and other particularly attractive sights). At the European level, cultural tourism accounted for about 40% of tourist arrivals in 2019 (CBI, 2021; European Commission, 2024), and creative tourism is a branch of cultural tourism. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the travel preferences of Europeans included cultural tourism and the age group that preferred this type of tourism was the adult population, over 54 years of age (European Travel Commission [ETC], 2022). However, a new age group that is more assertive on creative tourism is the millennials, who want such unique experiences (CBI, 2021).

Our paper aims to reveal insights and nuances in tourists' perceptions of creative destinations in Europe. The main research questions of the study are 1) what concepts are highlighted in the analysis of the association of tourism and creative sectors?, 2) what factors facilitate the development of creative tourism in Europe? and 3) does creative tourism have a positive influence on tourists' intentions to visit a destination?

The findings are based on a qualitative methodology of two focus groups carried out with 20 people from 13 countries from Europe, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Spain, from two age ranges perspectives (18-29 and 30-66 years old). The focus groups explored various aspects of the creative tourism concept, including the levels of understanding of creative tourism concept among the participants, the European destinations linked with creative tourism, motivations and the factors that encourage engagement in creative tourism experiences in Europe. Additionally, the discussions explored future prospects for the evolution of creative tourism.

A wide range of opinions emerged, reflecting diverse perspectives on creative tourism trends and patterns. Our analysis reveals several areas for further development regarding the integration of creative experiences into tourism strategies, such as putting in value the cultural inheritances, integrating natural environments into creative events and incorporating new technological advancements such as augmented and virtual realities into creative tourism initiatives.

1. Creative tourism conceptual identification

Creative tourism has emerged as a niche field derived from cultural tourism (Richards & Raymond, 2000) and has been increasingly promoted to revitalize cultural tourism destinations. In the view of several authors (Kahl, 2009; Mumford, 2003; Zeng et al., 2011) creativity consists of four interactive components: people, processes, products and place. Creativity in tourism, tourism experience and co-creation as well as cultural and event tourism are in the opinion of Galvagno and Giaccone (2019) the main research themes in creative tourism, and Remoaldo et al. (2020) consider the concept of creativity and innovation as essential in creative tourism.

As defined by Richards and Raymond (2000), creative tourism offers visitors the opportunity to develop their creative potential through active participation in courses and learning experiences specific to tourist destinations where such activities are practiced. Also, from the definitions given to creative tourism by other authors (Maldonado-Eraza et al., 2016; Richards & Raymond, 2000; Smith, 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2006) it appears that there are several common elements, such as participatory, authentic experiences, which in contact with locals, give tourists the opportunity to exercise and develop their creative skills.

According to UNESCO (2006), creative tourism can be seen as an authentic experience, which involves engaging tourists in a participatory learning process in the arts in a particular place. Creative tourism differs from traditional cultural tourism, involving a shift in the offer from tangible to intangible tourism products (Li & Kovacs, 2024; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014). And it aims to encourage authentic encounters between hosts and guests, with the aim of promoting the exchange of skills and knowledge (Wattanacharoensil & Sakdiyakorn, 2016). Traditional cultural tourism has had to reinvent itself (Tan et al., 2016) to meet the demands of tourists seeking more distinctive experiences, thus contributing to the emergence of creative tourism.

Several studies addressing creative tourism focus on the creative atmosphere (Cheng & Chen, 2023) present in creative tourism destinations, responding to the needs of a category of tourists eager for more authentic tourism (Li & Kovacs, 2024). Tourists are looking for new forms of leisure in a new way, involving engagement

in different activities and transformative experiences rather than those produced in mass and standardised tourism (Remoaldo et al., 2020; Richards, 2020) and creative tourism, is gaining more and more attention, becoming increasingly popular (Wei et al., 2023). Thus, tourists enter the everyday life of the tourist destination (Richards, 2020) and through active involvement co-create tourism products (Akdemir et al., 2023; Deng et al., 2024).

Creative tourism offers the visitor the opportunity to tap into their creative potential, which contributes to the enhancement and expansion of the experience, leading to the tourist's attachment to the place (Blapp & Mitas, 2018) and possible return (Wei et al., 2023). Creative spaces constitute basic elements of creative tourism development thus promoted as a model of sustainable tourism (Corá & Henriques, 2021; Khadivar & Golestani, 2022; Li & Kovacs, 2022; Tan et al, 2014; Thongsamak & Jitpakdee, 2019; UNESCO, 2006), also contributing to the development of local communities (Corá & Henriques, 2021; Sarantou et al., 2021), and for many cities, creativity is even the only option for development, not just an asset (Richards & Raymond, 2000). Creative development and creative tourism are a development pathway for smaller communities (Remoaldo et al., 2020), and intangible heritage and creative industries can be a tourism asset for creative cities (Arcos-Pumarola et al., 2023). Dias et al. (2023) address the factors that are most valued by creative tourism entrepreneurs in the destination context, and the results highlighted entrepreneurial culture, level of cooperation and quality of life. Creative tourism enterprises are operated by creative people, such as entrepreneurs and artists. The development of creative tourism aims at promoting sustainable development as the emphasis is put on creative renewable resources (Guo et al., 2023). Creative tourism is considered more sustainable than the cultural tourism in general, which is based on consumption (Remoaldo & Cadima-Ribeiro, 2019). Creative tourism networks play an important role in the development of creative tourism. The CreaTour network, for instance, was conceived to support the development of creative tourism in Portugal, in small towns and rural areas (Marujo et al., 2020). At a global level, the Creative Tourism Network, an official, non-profit organization, was created in 2010, aimed at contributing to the development of creative tourism and aims to increase the visibility and viability of creative tourism, creating both new and memorable experiences for tourists and sustainable benefits for local communities (Creative Tourism Network, 2024). This network includes cities of different categories, from national capitals such as Paris, to regional ones such as Barcelona or small towns such as Biot on the French Riviera (Remoaldo & Cadima-Ribeiro, 2019). Touristic networks act as systems that are able to integrate touristic destinations (Zach & Racherla, 2011), having a positive contribution to the development of tourism enterprises. According to the creative tourism networks, Europe presents a strong concentration of creative tourism initiatives in countries such as Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Belgium, Austria and Great Britain (Remoaldo & Cadima-Ribeiro, 2019).

Li and Kovacs (2024) consider that no attention has been paid to motivating creative tourists to visit certain places and events. Tourists have very subjective opinions (Tan et al., 2016) about the experiences they treat and are at the same time important actors in shaping the tourism industry. Tan et al. (2014) analyse creative tourists and their perceptions of destination experiences, identifying several groups, including: tourists looking for novelty, those seeking knowledge and skills, those aware of environmental issues, or those just looking for leisure. The shift towards an experience-based economy, as opposed to the traditional product and service-based economy, in which tourists experience a memorable stay with a transformative impact on their thinking and action, is at the heart of the 'creative turn of tourism' (Richards, 2011).

Ramos-Soler et al. (2019) studied the online and offline sources used by tourists and the resources they used during their trip, tracking tourists' expectations about the functions of applications that can help improve the tourist experience.

2. Methodology

In the current literature devoted to the subject, in-depth interviews were conducted with both tourists and hosts and semi-structured interviews were used which were combined with secondary data analysis. Then, all these different sources were combined using Atlas.ti software (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2010). Focus group is a qualitative technique for collecting qualitative data from a group of people, usually through semi-structured questions and is also used in tourism. The focus group is a qualitative research tool that prioritizes understanding the commonalities within a group of respondents centred around the research focus (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Daniels et al. (2019) present the characteristics and purposes of the focus group, present the role of the moderator, as well as its advantages and disadvantages.

The objective of the focus group is to explore different points of view, to discuss different perspectives, to assess the preferences of residents, tourists and stakeholders that could facilitate access to cultural tourism using electronic services (Aldhanhani & Zainudin, 2022) or the use of advanced information and communication technologies (Trinchini & Spyriadis, 2019). Richard et al. (2018) analyse idea generation in the hospitality industry using text-based online focus group versus classic, physical focus group.

The focus groups are considered as beneficial when studying social phenomena generating rich data that aids decision-making and particular insights often unavailable through other methods (Williams & Katz, 2001). Among the advantages of focus groups is that they capture a wide range of opinions and interactions, including direct challenges and collective viewpoints resulting depth of dialogue through dynamic interactions constructed in social contexts (Smithson, 2000). Limitations of focus groups include the logistical difficulties or the risk of dominance of certain participants within the discussion. Moreover, due to a small

sample size, the findings may not be generalizable to the broader population (Masadeh, 2012).

The empirical findings of the paper are based on the implementation of two focus groups approaching the main topic of creative tourism. The focus groups contributed to produce data and to explore insights related to the creative tourism providing the respondents with the opportunity to share freely their viewpoints in an intercultural environment. The two focus groups were differentiated based on age criteria, one group including participants with the age ranges 18-29 years old and one group with the age ranges 30-66 years. This criterion was applied in order to identify differences and similarities of perceptions at different age stages and patterns of opinions and experiences.

The focus groups took place on 18th of April 2024 in Lodz, Poland. The respondents were participants in the European training course “Sustainable and social tools for employability and entrepreneurial planning”, funded with the support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. The participation was voluntarily and the participants provided their agreements on the participation in the focus group and the recording of the discussion. The identity of the participants remains anonymous.

Socio-demographic factors defining the participants of the focus groups:

Group 1:

Number of participants: 12

Country of residence: Spain (2), Portugal (1), Greece (1), North Macedonia (2), Poland (1), Germany (1), Romania (1), Latvia (1), Italy (1) and Bulgaria (1)

Place of residence: urban (10) rural (2)

Age range: 18-29 years old

Domains of activity: engineering, cultural heritage, data science and business analysis, agricultural sciences, computational mathematics, youth work, music, sociology, business, finance and politics, business and management, multilingualism.

Gender: 6 male, 6 female

Group 2:

Number of participants: 8

Country of residence: Portugal (1), Greece (1), Romania (1), Croatia (1), Latvia (1), Estonia (1), Lithuania (1), and Bulgaria (1)

Place of residence: urban (6) rural (2)

Age range: 30 – 66 years old

Domains of activity: psychology, education, leadership, politics, music, business management, mathematics, geography.

Gender: 2 male, 6 female

The discussion was structured in five main steps and was facilitated by the group moderator. The discussion explored as main directions (1) the understanding

of the participants on the concept of creative tourism, (2) European destinations associated with the creative tourism and travelling preferences, (3) potential impact and benefits of creative tourism, (4) stakeholders involved and (5) premises for the future of creative tourism in Europe. The discussion was recorded audio and transcribed as text. A thorough review and analysis of the information content was performed and created a classification of group of codes and codes based on the main concepts of the paper. There were identified 8 code labels and associated terms and assigned 136 quotations for Group 01 and 101 quotations for Group 02 within the data content. The analysis was performed with Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis program.

Code labels and associated terms:

Tourism: country, city, village, local, tourist

Creative: experience, create, explore, discover, adventure, emotions, practice

Culture: festival, museum, food, music, dance, sites, tradition, murals, arts, crafts, sport, sculpture, religion, story, history, literature

Travel: people, places, memory, souvenir, journey, sightseeing, destination, prices, planning

Nature: beach, weather, mountain, islands, parks, caves

Technology: VR, metaverse, applications, holograms, 3D tours, AI, augmented reality, robots

EU programmes: Erasmus+, EVS, Discover EU, project, volunteering

Stakeholders: Government, municipalities, people, tourism agencies, NGO, businesses, influencers, artists

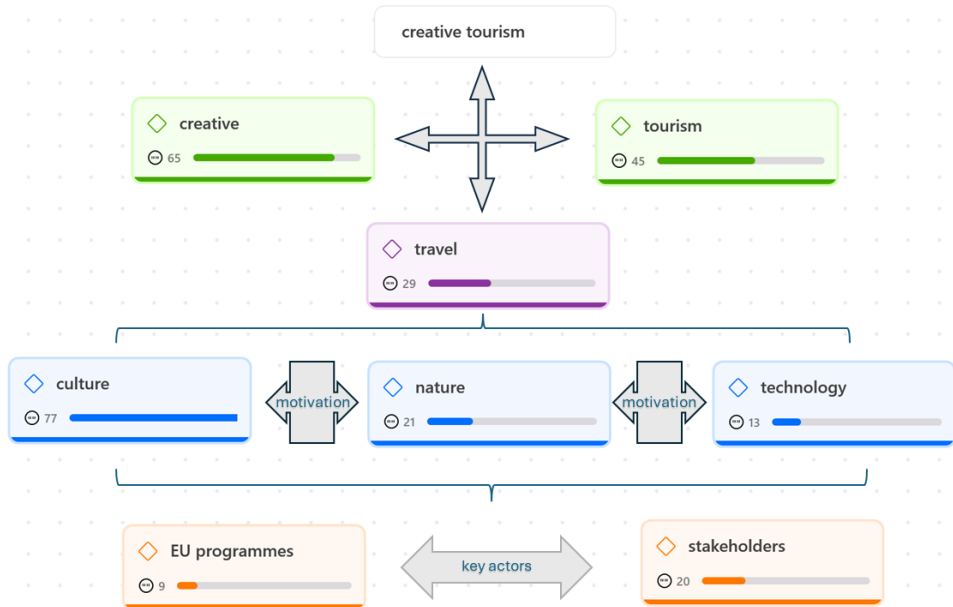
3. Analysis and discussions on creative tourism perceptions among European citizens

Creative tourism opportunities are beneficial incentives for tourists' motivations and destinations decision of engaging in tourism experiences. The motivation, perceived value and experience are factors that influence the tourists' perception over a destination facilitating an active understanding of the features of a place (Chang et al., 2014). Travellers' perceptions of value, quality, and price influence travellers' choice in travelling choices and re-visit intentions (Kashyap & Bojanic, 2000). Likewise, tourist perceptions of quality and value are influenced by places attributes and destination effects that form the travellers' experience opportunities (Murphy et al., 2000). Creativity in tourism involves the addition of new elements to tourism products and services, leading to transformative value creation and new dynamics of interactions.

3.1. Diving into creative tourism concept and the analysis frame

The development of cultural tourism has led to the emergence of several types of niche tourism (Benhaida et al., 2024) and especially creative tourism, has led to further research on the aspects related to the motivation for choosing this niche tourism, and qualitative research methods were preferred to quantitative ones. In tourism research, the focus group methodology incorporates a holistic view of tourism issues, as well as the results of the interaction between the researcher and the researched subject, thus leading to the adoption of an eclectic stance in tourism studies, which integrates both qualitative and quantitative aspects (Robina-Ramírez et al., 2021).

Figure 1. Network of codes

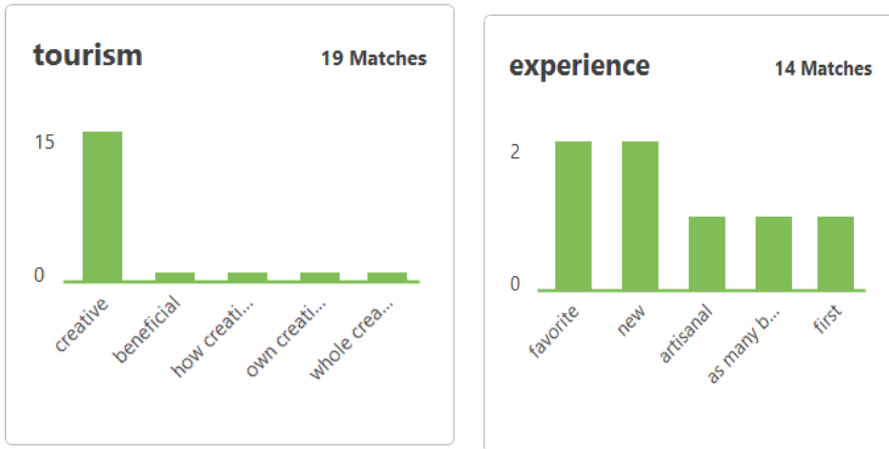


Source: authors' representation

Figure 1 presents the relation matrix among the code labels that represent the main concepts of the analysis and the connectivity factors. Based on the matrix, the paper elaborates on the relation between the creative activities and tourism, as a prerequisite of the concept of creative tourism, approaching in detail the motivations given by cultural, natural and technological factors. As key actors involved in this process there were analysed the influence of EU institutions and the EU programmes and the stakeholders that may contribute to creative tourism development.

According to Figure 3 it can be noticed a differentiation on predominant terms within the content analysis between the two groups. The most frequent words remain “creative” and “tourism” at the level of both groups. Besides the two main concepts, in the first group (18-29 years old) there are noted the words “Europe”, “country”, “food” while in second group (30-66 years old) it is remarked a higher frequency of the words “people”, “places” and “festival”.

Figure 4. Opinion mining on the focus groups main concepts - total



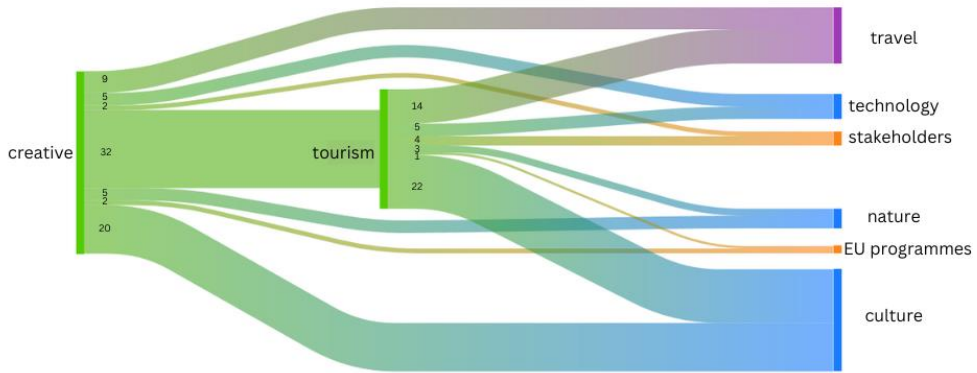
Source: authors' representation

According to Figure 4 we can identify the main associated concepts within the focus groups. The opinion mining facilitated to understand the opinions expressed by the participants through comparisons of similar entities or aspects. A pattern-based approach was created by using the Atlas.ti analysis programme and there were identified keywords and syntactic patterns in dependency relations. Thus, within the focus groups content analysis the most associated terms are creative tourism, and favourite and new experiences. As such creative tourism leads us to understanding experiences formation by collecting personal information.

Figure 5 presents in the Sankey diagram and the corresponding values table (Table 1), the level of co-occurrences of the code labels applied in the text analysis of the two groups in total, in relation to the creative tourism concept. The Sankey diagram presents the level of co-occurrences between two codes.

As it can be noted the highest association between the code creative is identified with the notion of tourism (creative – tourism with a value of 32), being the key concept analysed in the paper. High level of associations are noted with the code culture (creative-culture with a value of 20 and tourism-culture with a value of 22) therefore underlining the cultural factors influence in tourism developments and the fact that cultural tourism connects visitors to cultural attractions and events.

Figure 5. Sankey diagram: co-occurrences of the code labels in total



Source: authors' representation

In regard to the other codes included in the analysis it is remarked the connection with the traveling action (tourism – travel with a value of 14 and creative – travel with a value of 9). Among the motivating factors of engagement in creative tourism, after cultural incentives are registered the technological factors (creative-technology with a value of 5 and tourism-technology with a value of 5) and the environmental factors (creative-nature with a value of 5 and tourism – nature with a value of 3). It is also noted that the stakeholders are rather associated with involvement in tourism (tourism-stakeholders with a value of 4) rather than in creativity actions (creative – stakeholders with a value of 2). Engagement of a wide range of stakeholders, including public, private, civic, academic institutions and professionals in cultural and creative sectors, bring development perspectives to creative tourism perspectives within a broad vision that benefits all place users (Richards, 2020). Moreover, the particular involvement of tourists in generating knowledge flows is a factor of harnessing creative tourism experiences. As for the EU programmes co-occurrences these are rather perceived as enhancing creativity (creative – EU programmes with a value of 2 co-occurrences) than tourism (tourism – EU programmes with a value of 1 co-occurrence).

Table1. Table of co-occurrences of the code labels values in total

	● culture Ⓜ 104	● EU programmes Ⓜ 14	● nature Ⓜ 32	● stakeholders Ⓜ 24	● technology Ⓜ 23	● tourism Ⓜ 66	● travel Ⓜ 47
● creative Ⓜ 66	20	2	5	2	5	32	9
● tourism Ⓜ 66	22	1	3	4	5		14

Source: authors' representation

Table 1 presents the co-occurrences values between the code creative and the codes culture, EU programmes, nature, stakeholders, technology, tourism, travel in the first row and the values between the code tourism and the codes culture, EU programmes, nature, stakeholders, technology, travel in the second row within the two groups in total, as explained in Figure 5. The code creative and the code tourism have 66 quotations each. The code culture has 104 quotations, EU programmes 14 quotations, nature 32 quotations, stakeholders 24 quotations, technology 23 quotations and travel 47 quotations.

The participants' understandings of the concept of creative tourism is based on engagement with the visiting community as they believe that creative tourism involves that *"you must create some of the things that locals have in their daily lives"* (participant [P]7, group [G]2) and *"the ability to explore a country in a new way, not only visit some places, but also build some memories in there, that are connected with people of the area"* (P11, G1), as *"creative tourism means for me, exploring a country, not in touristic spots, but in spots that only local people know"* (P10, G1).

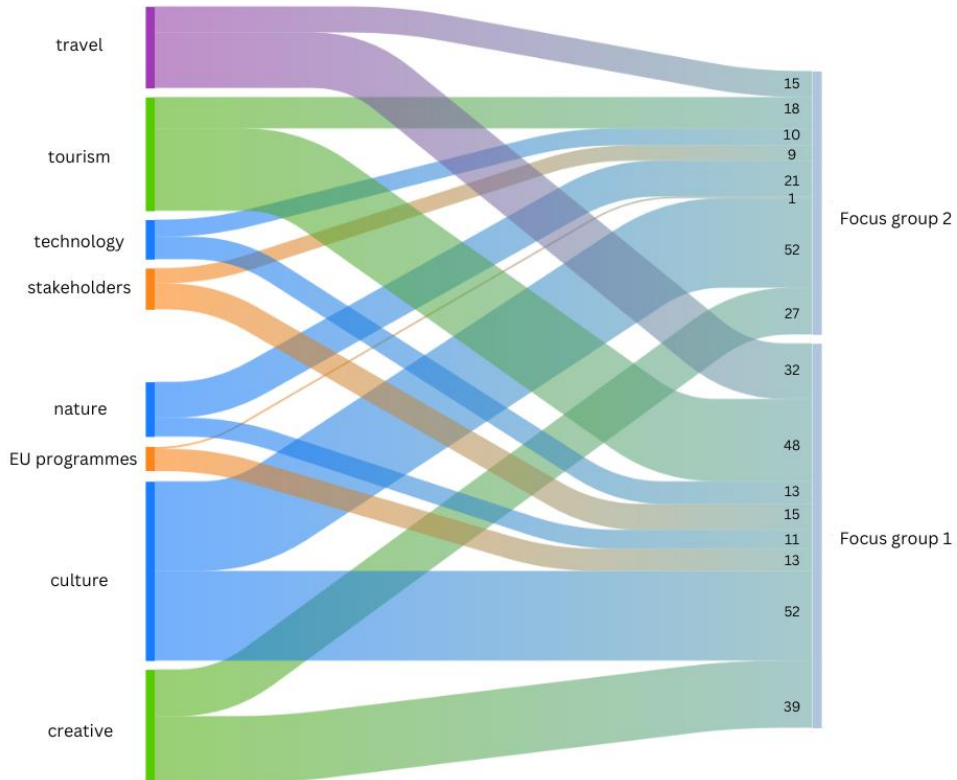
Tourists are increasingly becoming interested in creative tourism and seeking authentic and specific cultural experiences. This trend highlights the shift towards interactive cultural tourism and the blending of education and entertainment, allowing tourists to experience various cultures simultaneously (Smith et al., 2010).

In Figure 6 it is illustrated the quotations level of the code labels according to the key words associated, in a comparative perspective between the two groups of analysis. The detailed values are presented below.

According to Table 2, within the focus group 01, including participants with the age range 18-29 years old it is noted the preponderance of the concepts of culture (52 quotations) and tourism (48 quotations). A high level of perception is also associated with the concepts creative (39 quotations) and travel (32 quotations). The involvement of stakeholders is as well appreciated as relevant (15 quotations) and the opportunities provided by EU are well appreciated (13 quotations). Considering the motivations of engaging in creative tourism there are noted in order of relevance the cultural factors (52 quotations), technological factors (13 quotations) and nature (11 quotations).

Within the focus group 02, including participants with the age range 30-66 years old we observe that the respondents are the highest related with the cultural factors (52 quotations) followed by natural factors (21 quotations) and technology (10 quotations). Creativity is well appreciated (27 quotations) and the involvement in tourism (18 quotations) and travelling actions (15 quotations). The involvement of stakeholders is considered as beneficial (9 quotations). Less involvement is perceived in relation to EU programmes and creative tourism (1 quotation).

Figure 6. Sankey diagram: Intensity of participants' references to code labels within each of the focus groups



Source: authors' representation

In a comparative perspective between the two groups it is noted a similar level of appreciation in relation to the cultural factors. On the other side while the younger generation relate more to creativity factors when engaging in tourism activities, the second group related more to the natural and environmental factors. The technological factors are slightly better considered within the 1st group. The connectivity of creative tourism with EU programmes is perceived as higher within the 1st group in comparison with the 2nd group as well as the involvement of stakeholders.

Table 2. Intensity values of code labels references within the 2 focus groups

		1: focus group 1 136	2: focus group 2 101	Totals
● ◇ creative	66	39	27	66
● ◇ culture	104	52	52	104
● ◇ EU programmes	14	13	1	14
● ◇ nature	32	11	21	32
● ◇ stakeholders	24	15	9	24
● ◇ technology	23	13	10	23
● ◇ tourism	66	48	18	66
● ◇ travel	47	32	15	47
Totals		223	153	376

Source: authors' representation

It is therefore noticed that while creative tourism is appreciated in positive terms by both groups there are differentiations in regard to the context and motivations of engaging in such experiences according to the age characteristics. A common and highly relevant incentive is however given by culture and the associated cultural factors.

3.2. European creative tourism and development perspectives

Europe has a leading place in international tourism enhanced by the environmental diversity of EU member states that allows visitors to experience a wide range of climatic regions, cultures, and landscapes. While the market in Western Europe is already mature, significant growth in visitor numbers is expected in Central and Eastern European countries (Dale & Robinson, 2007).

As destinations associated with creative tourism by the focus groups respondents, the European countries are considered as highly relevant. As reasons that stimulate the involvement in creative tourism the respondents made reference to natural places where you can do a lot of creative things, different landscapes including culture and natural resources, combinations of cultures and civilizations, cultural and religious reasons and festivals.

When asked if they visited any destinations in Europe specifically for their creative offerings, 9 of the participants in the focus group 01 confirmed, mentioning as countries Portugal, Italy, Croatia, Poland, Türkiye, Germany and France and 3

respondents said no. In the second group, 4 participants confirmed mentioning as countries Portugal, Spain, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, France and Latvia and 4 said that they haven't. The visited destinations are visually presented in Figure 7.

Even though some of the participants' mentioned that they haven't been in a travel specifically for a creative activity, they mentioned several events and festivals organized in their own countries. *I think it would be a good strategy for governments to put such interesting festivals in small towns to boost the economy, to boost tourism. So now I see the value in that* (P1, G2).

Exploring further the participants motivations that would influence them to engage in creative tourism travels in Europe it emerged as most frequent factors food, sports, music, events (exhibitions), history, nature, welcoming people and the hospitality of the place, economical factors (for eg. prices of tickets) and safety. Most of the options included as stimulating factors music, food and nature for both groups.

Figure 7. Visited countries for their creative destinations



Source: authors' representation

The creative turn has reshaped tourism by adding creative content to products and making tourism a space for skill development turning tourism into a dynamic and creative environment, fostering new practices and challenging traditional spaces.

Creativity enhances tourism with activities and atmosphere, while tourism supports creative endeavours as an alternative to mass tourism (Richards, 2011). *Creativity is something that adds value to any destination that you want to go* (P3, G2).

The memories created and experiences are factors that represent as well motivations of returning to a visited place. Moreover positive memories construct strong associations with the tourism experiences. Exploring the participants experiences in creative tourism have emerged positive connections with the place alongside the people and events.

Creativity is a supporting factor in developing innovative solutions to social issues, benefiting society as a whole. Modern tourists increasingly seek new experiences that involve active participation and experiential learning, addressing their creativity and social consciousness generating a complex relationship between creativity and tourism (De Bruin & Jelinčić, 2016). Benefits of integrating creativity into travel experiences at European level have been identified as bringing unique and personal experiences given by locals values and their tradition, boosting the economy for the country and bringing financial benefits, creating good memories, emotions and emotional bonds, expanding horizons and makes the perspective wider, understanding the culture better and learning new skills.

The perspectives of creative tourism developments unveil different perceptions among the focus groups participants. When asked how do they envision the future of creative tourism evolving in Europe the participants underlined the influence of technology and digital advancements, including elements such as the metaverse, augmented and virtual reality, the artificial intelligence in creating an itinerary and organizing travel and get travelling assistance as well as increased accessibility to events and festivals by technology advancement for people with disabilities or without financial resources. *We have already implemented some kind of 3D tours in museums and especially in caves, and you can enjoy the experience and also the history about the place* (P1, G1). The technological enhancements do more than entertain; they have the potential to facilitate a deeper connection between the tourists and the places by providing personalized and context-sensitive experiences. Residents and tourists alike can uncover hidden stories, participate in touristic processes through interactive platforms, or contribute to local culture by engaging in digital art installations. Interactive maps and apps can guide people with disabilities, offering customized routes and information adapted to their specific needs. In this perspective, the creation of experience-centric networks, which rely on interactive and collaborative environments, demands new technological skills and brings new directions in developing engaging and immersive experiences for users (Romero & Molina, 2011). However, the technological advancements shall be regarded with care in consideration of the risks that they involve. *I really hope that in the future we find somewhere to regulate a balance between what AI is supposed to bring to culture* (P5, G1).

Moreover, other aspects such as extended European programmes and more attention to the local communities and in villages have been emphasized. By equipping local entrepreneurs with necessary skills and knowledge, it fosters local entrepreneurship, attracts new talent, and enhances the residents' skills strengthening the local economy and bringing new innovative activities within these communities (Dias et al., 2021). Also the need of preservation of the natural landscape has been underlined as a priority for the future creative tourism initiatives. *I would preserve the nature and give access to people to nature and make it and leave it authentic* (P3, G2).

Various groups and individuals, such as local residents, tourists, local governments, and tourism enterprises, influence the direction of tourism initiatives. In the perspective of new development it is necessary to consider the viewpoints and concerns of these diverse stakeholders and encourage their active engagement, helping to prioritize the interests of different groups. Moreover, community-based tourism initiatives underline the importance of local resident participation in creating tourism products and services. Stakeholders' involvement is based on connections between community actors, emphasizing the need to consider a broad range of interests when making decisions (Liu & Kou, 2024). Stakeholders to be involved in creative tourism mentioned by the participants included governments, municipalities, local or regional councils, people, travel influencers, tourist agencies, local associations, NGOs, unions, artists, private sector. The role of governments has been brought into attention as providing policies support and infrastructure. *If I was in government, I would actually make policies to make these festivals in different areas just to boost the local industries* (P1, G2). By considering the interests of all stakeholders, including local communities, natural resources, cultural heritage, and the environment, governments can develop strategies that balance economic, social, and environmental factors ensuring the tourism sector's long-term viability and safeguarding the communities and local ecosystems (Liu & Kou, 2024). Cooperation among stakeholders has been emphasized as beneficial for tailored solutions adapted to the local communities' environments. *I think that it's collaboration of people, government, also local organizations* (P10, G1) enhancing active engagements. *I think that local associations can contribute because associations are places of gathering people like-minded and that want to make a change* (P3, G2).

Another relevant direction that has emerged within the focus groups is connected to the involvement and potential role of European Union programme in future creative tourism developments. The EU acknowledges the role of culture in enhancing the European tourism experience and boosting Europe as a global destination. The European Commission provides support to cultural tourism sectors with the highest growth potential (European Commission, 2024). EU Programmes mentioned by the participants include DiscoverEU, Erasmus+ and European Volunteering Service (EVS). When asked about the favourite travel memory from Europe and the reasons of being so, the participation in previous projects have been mentioned as *the best memory for me it was two years ago. So I think because it was*

in Slovenia doing my first Erasmus. It was super good because I really enjoy all the experience with all my friends and everything (P1, G1); my favourite experience from traveling in Europe, I believe, is when I went to a small city next to Krakow in Poland because it was my first experience of traveling alone and also was for an Erasmus plus project (P10, G1); mine was during my Erasmus in Arctic Norway (P11, G1).

In the perspective of creative tourism developments, negative impacts shall be considered as well. The boom in tourism in recent decades has led to overcrowding in some popular destinations. This has become increasingly annoying for both residents and tourists. Mitchell (2013) points out that there is a risk of following a mercantile approach, similar to what has happened with more common cultural products. This risk is particularly high if community dynamics become fragile due to the increased activity and the emergence of conflicting economic interests within the community. Moreover, in an emerging sector, a functional transformation is occurring in many landscapes and attention is needed to landscape deterioration risks, as areas will evolve to fulfil new consumptive roles. This shift reflects the changing dynamics and challenges of integrating creative tourism into these regions. Therefore, involvement in touristic authentic experiences presents new challenges for this decade. With a growing tendency, creative tourism has become a new challenge for many destinations that, for decades, relied on a cultural tourism massification model (e.g., Barcelona, Venice, Rome). Given its potential to open new destinations, creative tourism must advance into a new phase to avoid becoming banal. A strong commitment is needed particularly for emerging destinations, whether urban or rural, especially in rural areas where the structure is typically fragile and depends heavily on local actors and business entrepreneurship (Remoaldo & Cadima-Ribeiro, 2019). *I will argue that not every place that there is creative tourism it becomes better because I think and that's more of a downside, it may become artificial so for me there are benefits to it only if this creativity has value in it and not only something superficial in order to bring tourists and with their money (P8, G1).*

4. Limitations and future directions

This study acknowledges several limitations that we need to consider. We envisage these limitations from the perspective of future research to expand on the current findings, thereby enhancing the overall understanding of the factors influencing the perceptions of creative tourism. By addressing these gaps, subsequent studies can provide new insights and contribute to a deeper understanding of the determinants driving creative tourism.

Firstly, the paper is subjected to a limited number of participants involved in the two focus groups. The scope of the target group is limited to participants from 13 European countries that generate the identified results and relations in the content, which limit its generalization. Other limits are given by the age limits of the

participants, being involved two different ranges (18-29 and 30-66 years old) and to the fact the focus groups took place in a common setting. Imbalance of the participants is also related to the gender of participants, 8 male and 12 female and the discrepancies between the places of residence, urban (16 participants) and rural (4 participants). The level of the discussion was influenced by the level of English language of the participants, none of the participants being native in English.

The given limits of the study give us possible future directions of enlarging the geographical scope and number of interviewed respondents. Also, new insights would emerge in the case of expanding the no. of focus groups implemented for a deeper exploration of the topic and enable meaningful comparisons. Although this approach captured original points, future research could benefit from exploring creative tourism obstacles and barriers leading to an in-depth understanding of the challenges and facilitate the development of tailored solutions to overcome these obstacles in different settings.

Moreover, conducting a more comprehensive and systematic analysis by involving a larger number of participants and focus groups supported in different locations, would yield deeper insights on the challenges and opportunities encountered by stakeholders in the creative tourism sector and provide a richer understanding of the diverse factors influencing the creative tourism sector development.

Conclusions

The desire to discover new destinations, where tourists can try new experiences, has gained more and more interest from tourists. The development of the tourism-culture-creativity relationship has led to the promotion and development of creative tourism. Creative tourism requires active involvement from tourists, who are engaged in different activities, and the cultural resources used for this purpose contribute to the development of these experiences. Creative tourism emerged as an evolved, interactive and integrated form of cultural tourism (Trinchini & Spyriadis, 2019). It can be practiced in both urban and rural environments, and creativity can be used both as a main tourist attraction or complementary to the respective destination (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2010). According to Remoaldo et al. (2022), creative tourism in urban areas proved to be more active, involving multiple forms of manifestation.

The paper explores the perceptions of European tourists upon creative tourism through a qualitative analysis having as base two focus groups carried out with 20 participants from 13 European countries. The insights present similarities and different nuances in creative tourism perceptions according to the age ranges of tourists, in a comparative perspective 18-29 years old and 30-66 years old.

From a researcher's perspective, studying creative tourism is beneficial for understanding tourism development as this approach points out new contemporary

trends in tourism development. Researching this theme emphasizes the dynamics of creative industries in association with tourism and the potential of cross-sectoral collaboration between the tourism sector and creative industries, suggesting new models of partnership and innovation.

While the interest in researching creative tourism has been growing since the 2000s, at the level of tourists themselves the level of being familiarised with the concept is rather low. The participants involved in the focus groups mentioned they haven't heard about creative tourism before and when defining the concept they provided their own personal suppositions and opinions by associating the words creativity and tourism. The most frequent words that emerged within the analysis are creative, tourism, people, experience, places and festival that underlines the strong association of tourists' active engagement within the creative events and the influence of the place-based influences. Moreover the opinion mining revealed the high association between creativity and tourism as well as favourite and new experiences.

The co-occurrences analysis among the code labels underlines that the creative tourism is strongly connected with culture and that the cultural factors have a high influence in the decision of involving in a touristic activity. In consideration of the motivations of involvement in creative tourism activities it has been identified that the involved respondents with the age range 18-29 have a preponderant preference towards creativity factors while the respondents with the age range 30-66 are predisposed to motivations connected with nature and environmental connected activities.

Both groups envisage an increase of technological and digital factors in the future of creative tourism. The integration of technology bridges the gap between tangible and intangible culture, making touristic experiences more interactive and enjoyable. Advanced technologies such as augmented reality or virtual reality and interactive installations have the potential to transform touristic destinations into dynamic and engaging environments. For instance, technology can support to overlay historical information, artistic interpretations, or gamified elements onto physical locations, enable residents and visitors to interact with the culture of the place and offer immersive experiences that transpose tourists to different historical periods.

The touristic activity is highly connected with travelling and the associated terms such as people, places, memory, souvenir, journey, sightseeing, destination, prices and planning.

The need of stakeholders' involvement is highlighted in respect to the development perspectives of creative tourism. As stakeholders identified there are the governments, municipalities, local or regional councils, people, travel influencers, tourist agencies, local associations, NGOs, unions, artists and private sector. European Union is appreciated to be a key stakeholder in supporting the creative tourism development by facilitating a favourable environment and supportive policies and programmes.

The critical assessment and risks of creative development need to be considered as well in the development perspectives. The excessive growth and dangers of commercialization shall be regarded with care and sensitivity.

In short, creative tourism revitalizes cultural landscapes, offering fresh perspectives for both residents and visitors. Creative tourism enhances participation and fosters the relational aspect of the touristic exchange. It transforms local stakeholders into both producers and users, including tourists who visit and engage with the community's structures. This interaction revitalizes prime areas, such as the often underutilized old town, bringing new life into them (Marques & Borba, 2017). This approach transforms locals and tourists alike into active place-makers and change makers, fostering a sense of ownership and engagement with their community. Future exploration of the study is envisaged in consideration of new insights that can represent relevant arguments in dedicated tools and programmes that facilitate creative tourism development.

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