

ASSESSING CULTURAL TOURIST FLOWS: A COMPREHENSIVE METHODOLOGY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Manuela BREBAN

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6160-7662>

University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania

Email: manuelabreban21@gmail.com

Daniel BADULESCU

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8653-0149>

University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania

Email: dbadulescu@uoradea.ro

Jamila JAGANJAC

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9587-3098>

University "Vitez", Travnik, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Email: jamila.jaganjac@unvi.edu.ba

Alina BADULESCU

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0090-9340>

University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania

Email: abadulescu@uoradea.ro

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Abstract:

Cultural and event tourism plays a key role in the global tourism industry, contributing significantly to national, regional, and cross-border development strategies. It attracts visitors interested in cultural heritage, artistic events, and local traditions, supporting the preservation and promotion of local identity. Assessing cultural tourist flows become essential to understand their economic and social impact, and this article proposes an integrated methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, including data collection on cultural events, participant estimation, economic analysis, satisfaction assessment, data visualization, reporting, and continuous monitoring. The proposed model ensures a comprehensive evaluation of cultural tourist flows and supports the sustainable development of cultural tourism. Its relevance is both theoretical and applied: it offers a conceptual and analytical framework for studying this complex phenomenon, but also, it provides useful insights for decision-makers and stakeholders involved in tourism development, helping to design effective policies and strategies for promoting and managing cultural tourism. The novelty of the research lies in the proposal of a detailed and integrated methodology tailored to the specific challenges of evaluating cultural tourism, aiming to improve data accuracy, strategic planning, and long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Cultural and events tourism, Tourist flows assessment, Economic impact

1. Introduction

Cultural and event tourism is an important and dynamic segment of the global tourism industry, with a significant impact on economic and social development. This type of tourism attracts visitors interested in cultural heritage, artistic events, local traditions and customs, therefore contributing to the preservation and promotion of local culture. In the context of globalization and increased mobility, cultural and event tourism has become an essential component of tourism development strategies at national, regional and cross-border levels. At the national level, cultural and event tourism contributes to the diversification of the tourism offer and attracting a large number of visitors, significantly contributing to economic development and promoting the country's image internationally. On a regional scale, it can stimulate the economic and social development of local communities, by creating jobs, business opportunities and additional income. Meanwhile, in cross-border regions, cultural and event tourism facilitates cooperation and cultural exchanges between countries, contributing to the strengthening of international relations and the promotion of peace and stability.

The problem addressed in this article is important both theoretically and practically, it fosters the advancement of knowledge and research practices in the area of cultural tourism, providing a conceptual and analytical framework for studying this complex phenomenon, and, respectively, helps decision-makers to develop effective policies and strategies for the promotion and management of cultural tourism (Institutul Național pentru Cercetare și Formare Culturală, 2020; Badulescu et al., 2018).

The importance of assessing the dimensions of cultural flows is underlined by numerous international studies and reports. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), cultural tourism represents approximately 40% of all international tourism, and this proportion is constantly growing (World Tourism Organization, 2018; UNESCO, 2024). In Europe, cultural tourism is recognized as a key factor for sustainable development and for promoting cultural diversity (European Commission, Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, 2022; Richards, 1996). The European Commission also supports the development of cultural tourism through various programs and initiatives, such as the European Cultural Routes, which promote Europe's common cultural heritage and contribute to the economic development of lesser-known regions (EU Tourism Platform, 2024; CORDIS, 2024).

2. Theoretical background and the need for a comprehensive approach in the field

2.1 Challenges in defining and assessing cultural tourism and cultural tourists

Evaluating and quantifying cultural and event tourist flows is a complex challenge, due to the diversity and specificity of this type of tourism. Cultural motivations are invoked by the majority of tourists who choose Europe as a holiday destination, and cultural tourists "by definition" are estimated at over 37% of all tourists in Europe, highlighting its importance for the regional and local economy (European Commission, Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, 2022; UNESCO, 2024, Richards, 2018; Richards, 2021). Studies show that cultural tourists tend to spend 38% more per day and stay 22% longer in the destinations

they visit, therefore contributing significantly to the local economy (Mair & Weber, 2019; Dwyer, et al., 2005; Badulescu & Bac, 2004). Knowing and quantifying cultural tourist flows is essential for the balanced regional development of cultural tourism. Getz (2005) highlights that festivals and events are essential components of the tourism offering in numerous destinations, contributing to the economic and social prosperity of host regions, and this contribution justifies public funding of events and festivals as viable policy strategy for regional development. Events can draw in visitors who might not have considered the area, enhancing the destination's reputation and marketing (Mair & Weber, 2019), influencing tourism motivations and contributing to festival experiences and event management (Dwyer & Wickens, 2011). A CORDIS report highlights the importance of integrating sustainable practices into cultural tourism, highlighting its role in preserving heritage and supporting local communities, stimulating innovation and competitiveness among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), contributing to regional economic development (CORDIS, 2024).

However, even these solid arguments carry challenges and require clarification. The literature highlights that the most important problems stem from the difficulty of clearly defining cultural tourists and data collection methodologies, as well as from the inconsistency of methodologies for assessing the economic and social impact of cultural tourism. Cultural tourists can be museum visitors, festival attendees, tourists exploring historical sites or those interested in local traditions, but also people simply interested in the social, cultural, historical or everyday aspects of a particular destination. Therefore, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) or UNESCO define cultural tourism as "travel whose main purpose is to visit cultural sites and events in order to acquire new knowledge and experiences" (World Tourism Organization, 2019), "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination" (UNESCO, 2017, p.30), and ATLAS (Association for Tourism and Leisure Education and Research) describes cultural tourism as "The movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs" (Richards, 2003, p.6). It is probably this very diversity of definitions that makes it difficult to establish uniform criteria for identifying and quantifying cultural tourists.

Data collection methodologies are essential for assessing cultural tourist flows. These can include questionnaires, interviews, direct observations and analysis of data from ticket sales points. Popescu et al. (2018) point out that each method has its limitations, and combining them can be costly and time-consuming, and data may be incomplete or inaccurate, affecting the quality of the assessment. Assessing the economic and social impact of cultural tourism is another major challenge. Cultural tourists contribute to the local economy through their spending, but accurately measuring this impact requires detailed data on their spending, length of stay and activities undertaken. Popescu (2018) and Badulescu et al. (2024) point out that social impacts, such as the impact on local communities and the preservation of cultural heritage, are difficult to quantify. Cultural tourism can be influenced by seasonality and temporal variations of cultural events. Festivals, exhibitions and other events attract large numbers of tourists in a short period of time, which means large fluctuations in the data collected. This complicates the continuous assessment and comparison of data over the long term (World Tourism Organization, 2018).

The use of modern technologies, such as big data analytics, geographic information systems (GIS) and social media platforms, can improve the collection and analysis of data on cultural tourists, but the implementation of these technologies requires significant financial and human resources, as well as technical expertise (Popescu, et al., 2018). Inequalities in implementation and collection can distort data, discourage use and increase distrust in their comparability and reliability. This highlights the need for an integrated approach to maximize the economic and social benefits of cultural tourism.

2.2 Collaborative efforts for a comprehensive indicators system assessing cultural tourism

Addressing these challenges requires close collaboration between local authorities, cultural organizations and researchers, to develop effective methodologies and ensure an accurate and comprehensive assessment. The assessment and quantification of cultural tourist flows presents significant challenges, in particular due to the lack of a distinct category of “cultural tourism” in official statistics, such as those provided by Eurostat or OECD, which do not explicitly include a category for “cultural tourism”, or for “culture” as the main motivation for travel. This means that available data are often aggregated under more general categories, such as “leisure tourism” or “business tourism”, which makes it difficult to identify and analyze cultural tourists specifically (Institutul Național de Statistica/INS, 2021, 2024). To compensate for this absence, researchers and cultural organizations use alternative methodologies, such as opinion polls, on-site questionnaires, and analysis of data from ticket sales points. Data from travel agencies and online booking platforms are also used to obtain a clearer picture of cultural tourist flows (Institutul Național pentru Cercetare și Formare Culturală, 2020).

To put it differently, obtaining relatively simple information such as the evolution of the number of cultural tourists over a longer period of time (e.g. 20-25 years) is a considerable challenge, as the data are limited and fragmented. For example, in Romania, the Cultural Consumption Barometer provides information on trends in visiting cultural sites, but there is no long series of specific data for cultural tourists (Institutul Național pentru Cercetare și Formare Culturală, 2020). In other countries, such as France or Italy, there are studies and reports that analyse the evolution of cultural tourism, but these are often limited to shorter periods and to specific regions or cities (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2023).

There are concerns and initiatives to address this situation, both at national and international level, by proposing new indicators, developing experimental statistics and collaborations between various organizations and institutions. Eurostat has started to explore ways to include cultural tourism in its statistics by developing experimental statistics and specific indicators, give a more detailed view of the impact of cultural tourism in Europe (Eurostat, 2023), and the OECD has started to develop methodologies and indicators that better reflect the contribution of cultural tourism. Thus, in addition to the Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) developed by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and other international organizations to measure the economic impact of tourism (United Nations, 2007, 2013), other changes have been proposed to include indicators specific to cultural tourism, such as cultural tourist expenditure and the number of visits to cultural sites. Various countries and regions have initiated pilot projects to collect data on cultural tourism, or case studies to assess the impact of cultural tourism in specific regions and cities, using specific questionnaires and surveys. UNESCO has recognized the importance

of cultural tourism and developed initiatives to measure and monitor the contribution of culture to sustainable development, creating the framework of thematic indicators for culture in the 2030 Agenda (UNESCO, 2019; UNESCO 2024), by including specific indicators to assess the impact of culture, including cultural tourism. In summary, there are therefore concerns and initiatives to address the lack of a distinct category of cultural tourism in official statistics, but efforts are still in their infancy and are not systematic at a global level. However, collaborations between international organizations and the development of experimental statistics and specific indicators represent important steps in the right direction (Eurostat, 2023; Institutul Național pentru Cercetare și Formare Culturală, 2020; United Nations, 2013).

3. A proposed methodology for evaluating cultural tourist flows

We propose a methodology for evaluating cultural tourist flows and events which is based on a combined approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methods and drawing on several sources and common practices in evaluating cultural tourism flows and cultural events, such as the contributions of Baggio (2019) providing an overview of the methods used to measure tourism and its economic, social and cultural impact, including econometric models and numerical simulations; Calderón Puerta et al (2023) which analyses the evaluation of cultural tourist routes in five areas of analysis: destination quality, route promotion, tourist use, impact on the destination and user satisfaction, respectively Sánchez-Sánchez, et al. (2020) which proposes and validates a conceptual model for measuring the degree of satisfaction of cultural tourists. The proposed methodology involves a series of stages (see also Figure 1), as follows:

Stage 1. Collecting information on cultural events and manifestations

This involves listing all cultural events in the analyzed area, including their dates and locations. The information is obtained through office and field work, searches on the websites of organizers or public authorities with responsibilities in the tourism or cultural field, but also through questionnaires, interviews, direct observations and analysis of data from ticket sales points. Data from travel agencies and online booking platforms are also used to obtain a clearer picture of cultural tourist flows.

Stage 2. Estimating the number of participants

The initial estimate of the number of participants is made by collecting data on the number of participants at each event. In cases (very frequent, by the way) where there is no exact data, estimates based on the capacity of the locations and the type of event are used. Audience segmentation involves obtaining data on the place of origin of the participants and demographic information about them, such as age, gender, income and education. Therefore, we have two distinct sub-stages:

2.1. Identifying the origin of the participants, in which information is sought on the geographical origin of the participants, usually based on the criteria a. local participants (residents of the locality), b. national participants, and, respectively, c. international participants;

2.2. Establishing the demographic profile of the participants, which involves collecting demographic data (age, gender, income, education, background) to better understand who participates in the events.

Stage 3. Economic analysis

The economic analysis addresses the economic impact of cultural events, by estimating the average expenses per participant (accommodation, food, transport,

tickets) and calculating the total economic impact of the events. This is done by multiplying the number of participants by the average expenses and comparing the results with the estimated costs, in order to understand the economic aspects and, possibly, the opportunity of self-sustaining the event, with direct implications for its success and repetition.

Stage 4. Assessing participant satisfaction

Evaluating participant satisfaction is an important stage, which involves the application of questionnaires and surveys to assess participant satisfaction and to obtain feedback on the events. Online reviews and comments are also analyzed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the events.

Stage 5. Data visualization and interpretation and report creation

The data obtained are integrated into graphs and maps, for a better understanding of the distribution of demographic characteristics and economic data, flows, concentration, travel directions and consumption patterns of tourists/participants. They will be used to draft the Final Report, which will include all the information collected, hypotheses and analyses carried out during the research.

Stage 6. Monitoring and improvement through updates and recommendations

Monitoring and continuous improvement of the methodology involves periodic updates of data and analyses to reflect changes, trends and opportunities that may arise, but also to anticipate possible challenges and difficulties. Recommendations are also provided for improving events and increasing efficiency, for disseminating information and attracting a greater number of tourists.

This combined methodology ensures an accurate and comprehensive assessment of cultural tourist flows and events, contributing to the long-term planning of cultural tourism.

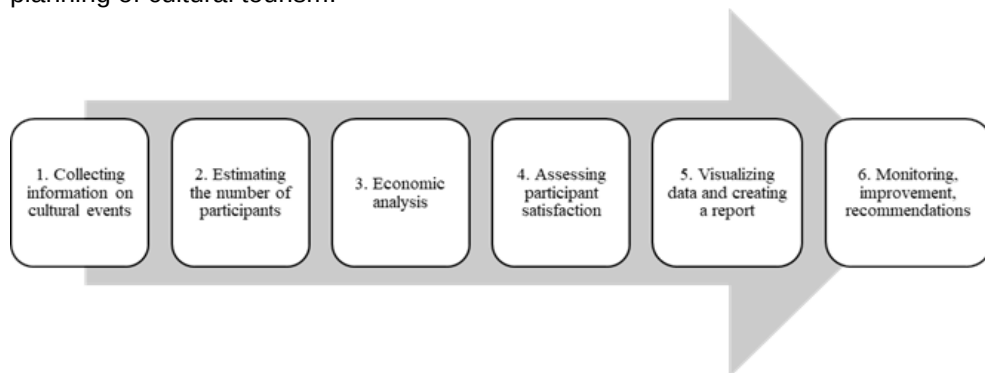


Figure 1. Stages of quantitative assessment of cultural tourism flows

Source: Authors' elaboration

To illustrate the applicability of the proposed methodology, we can consider a hypothetical example of evaluating a regional cultural festival held over three days in a medium-sized Romanian city. The event includes traditional music performances, local art exhibitions, and craft workshops. During the data collection stage, information sources are identified (organizers, online platforms, participant surveys). The estimated average number of participants is 5,000 per day, of which 55 % are local, 35 % national, and 10 % international. The economic analysis estimates an average expenditure of 100 RON/person for local participants and 200 RON/person for national and international ones, resulting in a direct economic

impact of approximately 2,175,000 RON (RON - Romanian currency). Participant satisfaction, assessed through online surveys and short on-site interviews, revealed a high level of satisfaction (over 80 %), along with suggestions for improving the gastronomic offer and enhancing access infrastructure. These insights can contribute to optimizing future editions and strengthening the event's touristic appeal.

4. Challenges in evaluating cultural tourist flows and audience segmentation

4.1. Audience Segmentation at Cultural Events: Criteria, Models, and Influencing Factors

One of the most important challenges in evaluating the flows of cultural tourists is included in the second stage, which involves segmenting the audience based on the origin of participants at cultural events, and assessing their number and share, especially where there are limited possibilities for field research (applying questionnaires or obtaining data from organizers) and extrapolating the results, or when this assessment is made ex-post, at a certain time after the end of the event. The literature recommends several data and estimations from various sources, cultural organizations, non-governmental organizations, articles in the specialized press, etc. (World Tourism Organization, 2018; Institutul Național pentru Cercetare și Formare Culturală, 2020). In Table 1 below we have attempted to systematize these assessments. It starts from two classifications - by the importance of the event location (local, national and, respectively, international) and, respectively, by the duration of the event (1 day, 1-2 days, 3 days and more). Thus, according to various experiences and assessments, local events record, as expected, an overwhelming participation of locals (between 70-90%) explained both by the limited significance of the event, but also by reduced promotion, accessibility and limited organizational resources (United Nations, 2007; Baggio, 2019; Frenț & Niculescu, 2023; UNESCO, 2015). As we move to cultural events with regional or national significance, the percentage of locals decreases (although they remain the majority) and the share of national and international tourists increases, attracted by the reputation of the event, but also by the possibility of combining several tourist motivations (relaxation, personal etc.), accessibility, accommodation offer etc. Moreover, international events can bring more tourists (non-residents) to the respective location, as these events are carefully and in advance prepared, to ensure wide dissemination, economic efficiency and reputation, effective promotion, attracting sponsors and the support of local authorities, acceptance by the community, etc.

Regarding the duration of the event, it is obvious that one-day events rely on the decisive participation of locals; national and international participants (especially) being quite rare, as tourists are less willing to travel for events and manifestations that take place over a short period of time. In the case of events that extend over two days, an increase in the share of national and even international tourists is noted, up to 40-50 % (of course, these maximum percentages are obtained in the case of cultural events of particular importance), mainly because they offer enough time and a diversity of tourist offer (not only cultural) to justify the trip. Moreover, events of three days or more can lead to an increase in the share of non-residents and a consolidation of the share of international tourists, because these events offer a more complete experience, better justifying the costs of travel and accommodation and have a well-consolidated resonance in their minds, that must-have that motivates a diversity and

constancy of national and international flows to the event and the respective locations (United Nations, 2007; Iftimoaei, et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2015).

Table 1. Segmentation of participants at cultural events based on the type and duration of the event

Event type/ origin of participants	By importance and location			By duration of the event		
	Local ¹	National ²	International ³	One-day events	1-2 days events	3 days and more events
Local attendees (residents)	70-90%	40-60%	20-40%	70-90%	50-70%	30-50%
National attendees	5-25%	30-50%	20-30%	5-25%	20-30%	30-40%
International attendees	5-10%	10-20%	30-50%	5-10%	10-20%	20-30%

Notes: ¹ Local festivals, craft fairs, community events; ² National festivals, large concerts, art exhibitions; ³ International film festivals, global conferences, international exhibitions

Source: Authors' elaboration

Interpreting the data based on the proposed model requires several cautions. First, all these percentages are estimates and may vary depending on the specifics of each event and its location. For example, in major tourist cities, the proportion of tourists to cultural events may be much higher, since a significant part of tourists (national and international) are there for other reasons than culture. The combination of the attractiveness of the locality and the scale of the event (local/national/international), the venue capacity and the expected duration of the event may influence the dynamics, size and structure of attendance, suggested in Table no. 1. In other words, events in small localities, with local relevance, held over a single day, are likely to have (and not exceed in time) a local dissemination and, as such, attract very few participants from outside the locality. Just as the significance of the event may influence the motivations for travel - certain events may have a remarkable regional or even national significance, but may be of little relevance to international tourists.

4.2 Specific Features of Audience Segmentation in Cross-Border Contexts and Quantitative Assessment of Cultural Tourism in Romania

Moreover, the novelty or, respectively, the persistence of the event in the public consciousness, can increase the number of participants (locals or tourists): events with a limited history and that have not stood out in previous editions are unlikely to attract the attention of people from outside the respective locality in the future. Finally, the distribution of these shares of participation in the case of cultural events in cross-border cooperation areas is also interesting. As a rule, with few exceptions, these events are local or sub-regional importance events, lasting 1 or maximum 2 days, and their emergence or revitalization started as part of a cross-border project organizationally or financially supported by various NGOs, local or sub-regional authorities, etc. All these elements may frame the participation as a mostly local one, but there are also elements that can increase its significance and implicitly the share of tourists, and we refer here to the mutual ethnographic or historical significance, the existence of linguistic and cultural links between the communities on either side

of the border (Badulescu, et al., 2016; Badulescu & Badulescu, 2017). These can motivate travel and facilitate interactions, transforming a relatively short trip (maximum 1-2 hours) into an international tourist one, by "crossing" the border. The existence of financial and organizational support in the case of cross-border projects should not be forgotten. Of course, from a scientific point of view, some cautions remain - how "international" is the profile of foreign tourists, or what would be the success and efficiency of such events if public financial support were to disappear.

The last part of this exploration aims to discuss specific information and sources related to the quantitative assessment of cultural tourist flows in Romania. Thus, although the National Institute of Statistics (INS) does not publish detailed data exclusively on cultural tourists, some reports include information about culture as the reason for travel. For example, in 2023, approximately 20% of all tourists mentioned "participation in cultural activities" as the main reason for the visit (Iftimoaei, et al., 2023). Other official information can be found in the reports of the Ministry of Economy, Energy and Business Environment/Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism, which state that in the pre-pandemic period, and respectively, after 2022, cultural tourism represented approximately 15-20% of total tourist arrivals in Romania (Ministerul Antreprenoriatului și Turismului, 2024). Lastly, Eurostat data shows that, on average, approximately 18% of tourists visiting Romania participate in cultural activities, such as visiting museums, attending festivals and other cultural events (Eurostat, 2024; Frentz & Niculescu, 2023).

As a general caution, applied to all the assessments presented above, we must emphasize that these percentages are estimates and are based on various studies and reports on the impact of tourism on local communities, which consider not only the ratio between residents and tourists in major tourist destinations, but also the various effects that may occur such as seasonal pressure on local resources (United Nations, 2007), the social, cultural and environmental impact of tourism, variations in local interest and support depending on the type, size and usefulness of events, etc. (Travel & Climate, 2024). In other words, these sources provide a basis for understanding how different types of events attract local participants and tourists, but, for more precise data, it is recommended that they be complemented by collecting information directly from event organizers or conducting surveys among participants.

5. Conclusions

Cultural and event tourism is a vital segment of the global tourism industry, and the assessment and quantification of cultural tourist flows are essential to understand the impact of this type of tourism on the economy and society. The methodology proposed in this research for the assessment of cultural tourist and event flows is based on a combined approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. This includes collecting information on cultural events and manifestations, estimating the number of participants, conducting economic analysis, assessing participant satisfaction, visualizing and interpreting data, producing the report, and continuously monitoring and improving the methodology. This approach ensures an accurate and comprehensive assessment of cultural tourist and event flows, contributing to the sustainable development of cultural tourism. The usefulness of our approach is revealed both from a theoretical and practical perspective, by developing knowledge and research methodologies in the field of cultural tourism but also by providing valuable information for decision-makers and actors involved

in tourism development, helping them to develop effective policies and strategies for the promotion and management of cultural tourism.

Knowing the number and share of participants in cultural-tourism events is essential for several reasons. For planning and management purposes, organizers can adjust the necessary resources based on the estimated number of participants (Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie, 2016). Quantifying the economic impact of the event by evaluating the share and profile of national and international tourists helps to estimate the economic impact on the local community, and allows organizers to adapt their marketing and promotion strategies for the cultural event, using the allocated resources. If the majority of participants are national tourists, promotion campaigns can be focused on domestic markets, and the exit to foreign markets is done gradually depending on the identification of the relevance of the event among potential tourists (Matei & Becuț Marinescu, 2024; UNESCO, 2015). The usefulness of the approach is also revealed in terms of cultural development and public policies. Knowing the preferences and behavior of participants helps to develop cultural programs that meet their needs and expectations. Participation data can be used by authorities to develop policies that support the cultural and tourism sector, better select events, size funding, infrastructure and other support measures. All this information is essential to ensure the success and sustainability of cultural-tourism events.

Our proposal faces certain limitations, including the fact that incomplete and imprecise data can influence the accuracy of the results, and the use of various methodologies for data collection and analysis can lead to inconsistencies and difficulties in comparing the results. Also, the impact of seasonality, or of very large events held in short periods of time, presents another challenge, as these fluctuations complicate the continuous assessment and comparison of data over the long term. Future research can continue our approach and overcome current limitations by exploring the integration of modern technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, to enhance data collection and analysis related to cultural tourists. One promising direction is the use of AI-driven predictive models that incorporate data from social media platforms - such as user-generated content, geolocation, and sentiment analysis, in order to identify behavioral patterns, to estimate attendance, and assess the real-time impact of cultural events. These tools can provide more dynamic and detailed insights into tourist flows, supporting more responsive and evidence-based cultural and tourism policies. Additionally, comparative studies between different regions and countries could help identify best practices and successful models for data collection and impact evaluation. Future research could also deepen the understanding of the socio-cultural effects of cultural tourism on local communities, including aspects related to sustainable development, heritage preservation, and environmental protection.

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