

Revitalizing Rural Tourism through Creative Tourism: the Role and Importance of the Local Community

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ABSTRACT Creative tourism is a current topic, yet most of the research is focused on the urban context, with few articles focusing on how creativity can be used and developed in the setting of rural tourism. Furthermore, the theoretical elements identified in this article can become checkpoints through which better strategies for sustainable rural tourism can be developed in the future. Although rich in culture, Romanian villages have not developed their rural tourism offer to its full potential, partly because of the lack of involvement of the local community in long-term tourism planning and development, but also due to the changes in what tourists want from their tourism experience. In response to shifting patterns in consumer behavior, creative tourism has emerged as a better form of cultural tourism, but mostly in urban areas, which has led to a proliferation of creative industries and people within that specific context. The study proposes that most Romanian rural communities in areas pertaining to tourism already have local individuals with some of the characteristics of the creative people necessary for the development of creative tourism. By involving the entire local community in tourism planning, and not just the local actors with direct ties to it, Romanian rural tourism can be revitalized.

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Rural tourism; Creative tourism; Integrated tourism; Local community; Experiential tourism

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1. Introduction

Tourism is the fastest growing and the largest industry in the world. Its growth can be attributed to people's increased standard of living, and to new forms of tourism, which have underlined the tourism experience, moving away from the traditional "sand and sea" view on vacations. Creative cultural tourism and rural tourism, with their experiential value, allow tourists to escape into a setting rich in specific actions and symbolism (Alvarez, 2010). With a rising demand for immersive experiences, rural communities have a potential source of additional income and further development beyond the scope of agriculture and forestry (Dougherty, Brown and Green, 2013).

However, in recent years, rural areas and the rural way of life, especially in developing countries, have been under threat from the disappearance of traditional agriculture and the loss of the local culture through urbanization and modernization. More and more rural people move to cities in search of a better life through access to better education and medical services, and more diverse jobs, leaving behind ghost villages (Gao and Wu, 2017). Nevertheless, in the modern world, rural areas are more than just villages; in theory, their functions extending to recreation, leisure, specialty food production, consumption, trade, and arts (Saxena and Ilbery, 2010). Moreover, above else, they are the destination for rural tourism. Rural tourism has two main characteristics: it revalorizes the existing infrastructure and heritage resources as tourist attractions (Almstedt, Lundmark and Pettersson, 2016), and it employs rural residents, slowing down the population loss in the area (Pribeanu, 2012).

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In practice, rural tourism is much more complex, with different key issues and stakeholders putting on a balancing act. A successful rural area revitalization needs to start with the local community's full participation, and a good partnership between the residents and all the outside forces invested in tourism development (Borma, 2012; Saarinen and Monkogoi, 2014; Li, Ryan and Cave, 2016). The local community solidarity, identity, and empowerment can be strengthened through effective collective action, leading to also a more sustainable rural tourism (Gao and Wu, 2017). Moreover, a staple of sustainability is also the integration of creative means into the tourism offer as a sure way to differentiate to local offer from many other rural tourism offers from throughout the world (Chugh, 2018).

Currently, Romania's rural tourism has not reached its full potential, so the current article aims to investigate whether the Romanian rural tourism can be revitalized by involving the local community in creative activities addressed at tourists. Since the topic has not been previously studied for Romania, the research was constructed based on scientific articles from around the world, exploring the available scientific journals on rural tourism, creative tourism, and the importance of the local community in both activities. Since the term creative tourism is considered a new form of tourism, most of the articles reviewed were published in the period between 2008 and 2019 in journals found on international scientific databases.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Rural tourism and the role and importance of the local community

Rural areas are sensitive to change and can be easily damaged by it, and tourism is one of the most potent agents of change that can affect a territory. In many countries, rural areas protect the regional natural and cultural heritage, which in turn attracts tourists looking for unspoiled nature, tranquility, personal contact with cultural legacies, and a genuine experience (Košić, Demirović and Dragin, 2017). Tourism, especially the rural type, is dependent on the local community's ability to make tourists feel welcomed.

Rural tourism is a space for those looking for quiet, natural beauty, and uniqueness (Blapp and Mitas, 2018). Rural tourism can also be defined as tourism happening in the countryside (Situmorang, Trilaksono and Japutra, 2019), which is associated with features of the rural area such as small enterprises, open spaces, nonurban activities, and sustainability (Gherasim and Gherasim, 2017).

When done right, the development of rural tourism can lead to healthy entrepreneurship in a country or region, that can later stimulate the economic growth within the entire area (Ratten, Costa and Bogers, 2019); can generate income and employment opportunities, particularly in the rural context (Sharpley and Roberts, 2004); and can influence other sectors such as agriculture, forestry, food processing, and handicrafts in ways which can contribute to the well-being of the entire community (Su et al., 2019). Rural tourism can be an additional way for rural residents to reduce poverty by exploiting existing livelihood resources, instead of replacing the traditional economic activities (Mureşan et al., 2016); therefore tourism has long been considered a catalyst of rural development and revitalization, especially for peripheral rural areas (Salvatore, Chiodo and Fantini, 2018). Other perceived benefits of tourism include the creation of new markets for local products, the revival of local customs and traditions, and an increase in the community's pride and sense of belonging (Naidoo and Sharpley, 2016). Tourism studies have consistently shown that when residents gain personal benefits from tourism activities, they exhibit a positive attitude towards tourism and support additional tourism development (Gursoy et al., 2019).

At the same time, unchecked tourism development can have negative socio-economic consequences such as price rises, short-term, poorly paid jobs and poor working conditions (Demirović et al., 2017), displacement and relocation of communities, an increase in crime and prostitution, the degradation of traditional culture, and environmental pollution (Alexander, Ramotadima and Sanderson, 2018; Shen et al., 2019).

In summary, successful long-term tourism: (i) makes optimal use of environmental resources, (ii) respects the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities; (iii) ensures viable long-term economic operations and socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders (Al Haija, 2011). That means the efficient and sustainable development of rural tourism does not just happen; it is a long-time joint effort

involving the central and local administration, the local community, domestic and foreign tourists, and business owners, whom all engage in strategic planning and cooperation (Chin, Thian and Lo, 2017). While not all the stakeholders have equal involvement in the decision process, all their interests and needs must be recognized and understood, so the process does not fail. Furthermore, while marketing research and tourism business development have emphasized the tourists' needs and desires (Al Haija, 2011), there is a growing consensus that tourism development should start with the local community and not be driven by global tourism organizations (Kapera, 2018).

The main reason why this shift is needed is that rural tourism development can cause conflict due to low economic development, increased social differentiation, mishandling of natural resources, and the local population's lack of control over the process (Curcija, Breakey and Driml, 2019). If the conflict is not resolved, it can cause anger and resentment among locals who were previously in favor of the process (Alexander, Ramotadima and Sanderson, 2018), going all the way to violence against tourism affiliated property such as signposts and info points, or blocking the tourists from entering a specific area (Wang and Yotsumoto, 2019). Therefore, the challenge is to create inclusive approaches that transform the local community from mere bystanders to full participants to the rural tourism development process. One possible solution is applying the principles of creative tourism to the rural tourism context.

2.2. Creative tourism as a possible means to revitalize rural tourism

More and more tourists show a growing desire to connect more intimately with the local communities they visit. This approach is called "creative tourism," and unlike traditional cultural tourism, it provides visitors with learning experiences, as they sometimes create their personal souvenirs (Angeloni, 2013). This shift in perspective was identified by Florida (2005) as the people's interest not only in places with physical attractions but also in communities where they can have high-quality experiences. Thus, the atmosphere and local quality of life have become attractiveness indicators for travel destinations.

The idea of a more hands-on tourism experience is not entirely new, ever since Pine and Gilmore (1999) described the transition from experience economy to transformation economy based on individual attributes. The result was a need for creativity from service providers, as they looked to new ways in which to meet the needs of consumers. In the realm of tourism, three possible creative developments were identified by Richards and Wilson (2006): creative spectacles, creative spaces, and creative tourism.

Creative tourism, although it is included under the umbrella of cultural tourism, differs from it in terms of focus: while cultural tourism is about built heritage, museums, and monuments, creative tourism concentrates on image, lifestyles, atmosphere, narratives, and media (Richards, 2014). Creative tourism has several advantages over cultural tourism (Carvalho, Ferreira and Figueira, 2016):

- Creativity is possessed only by a few individuals so that it can create an economic advantage.
- Creativity leads to innovation, allowing destinations to differentiate from other similar destinations.
- Creative resources are more sustainable, renewable, and mobile than tangible resources.
- Creativity involves active value creation from both providers and consumers, which become co-producers.

The last feature, being also a fundamental characteristic of services, means the creative tourism experience is personalized based on the tourist's cultural capital, knowledge, skills, emotions, and tastes (Duxbury and Richards, 2019). Moreover, according to the authors Carvalho, Ferreira, and Figueira (2016), the creative tourists mainly subscribe to the following profile: high social class and at least an academic degree, and they are connected professionally to the cultural or academic sector. Another important feature is their willingness to participate in learning activities based on the local culture, while they look for authentic experiences that increase their creative and cultural capital (Chang, Backman and Huang, 2014). In other words, creative tourists consume the local way of life, or culture, in a participatory manner through interaction with the local community and its artisans (Guilarte and González, 2016).

Artisans are an essential part of the creative tourism experience. As entrepreneurs, they preserve the cultural heritage of the place when they make authentic and original products that are part of the tourism experience. Artisans are characterized by their craft, but also by their willingness to pass cultural skills across generations (Ratten, Costa and Bogers, 2019). Nevertheless, artisans do not work in a vacuum; the prevailing culture which connects all the people from a specific region creates a local community, which in turn provides artisans with the infrastructure and social networks needed for them to employ their craft. Artisans entrepreneurs are people who use local materials and skilled trade to discover or create, evaluate and exploit opportunities for new goods, materials, processes, ways of organizing, and markets in a way that contributes to the social welfare of the communities (Bakas and Duxbury, 2018).

Interestingly enough, most research on creative tourism has focused on creative tourism in urban areas (Alvarez, 2010; Durmaz, Platt and Yigitcanlar, 2010; Cruz, 2014). This is mainly due to the relationship between creative tourism and cultural tourism (Richards, 2012), creativity and innovation – the creative industries are an overlap of culture, technology and commerce likely concentrated in large urban areas (Ghazi and Goede, 2019), and the fact that creative people, also known as the “creative class” (Florida, 2002) are those who work mainly in creative sectors, such as science and research, engineering, architecture, design, education, art, music, and the entertainment industry (Jarábková and Hamada, 2013).

However, considering the essential attributes of creative tourism mentioned before, rural areas also have the potential to attract the creative class, especially artisans, through a good environment, culture, and community facilities and networks (Stolarick et al., 2010). For rural locations, the development of creative tourism has many advantages (Ohridska-Olson and Ivanov, 2010): the revival of local crafts and traditions, the increase of the population’s pride in their cultural heritage, the preservation of culture, both tangible and intangible, the creation of new jobs and creative sectors, the economic spill-over effects of creativity, and the increase in destination competitiveness. Furthermore, in rural environments, artisan entrepreneurship is a mechanism through which the local community gains knowledge and skills from these talented individuals (Bakas, Duxbury and Vinagre de Castro, 2019), and when handicraft production is paired with tourism, the entrepreneurial venture is more likely to be profitable (Teixeira and Ferreira, 2019). Typically lacking the resources of labor and money associated with urban areas, rural territories economies are more resilient when based on unique histories, culture, and social context.

Rural communities may have another advantage over urban environments. If cities often need to attract the creative class (Florida, 2005), the rural environment has always relied on its local artisans and craftsmen to produce traditional items used in everyday life, whose utility might have been lost for urban activities, or replaced by industrial production items (Gherasim, 2012). In the interest of developing sustainable rural tourism, these artisans who are an essential part of the traditional rural industries, while not previously directly involved with the tourism activity, must now promote the host destination by offering the tourists a hands-on cultural experience (Curcija, Breakey and Driml, 2019). In doing so, they increase the degree in which the local community is involved with the tourism development in the area, ensuring a better alignment between the policies for tourists and the policies for residents, because the cultural tourists and the citizens have many similarities: the creative tourists want to be active participants in the host community’s culture, while the residents are the best makers and interpreters of said culture, and therefore they are the best at teaching it to others (Angeloni, 2013).

For a creative rural tourism experience to be developed successfully, there are some steps that any tourism development strategy should incorporate:

- Increasing the role and participation of the host community in the process (Antoniou, 2014; de Bruin and Jelinčić, 2016).
- Identifying all creative potential in the area and allocating enough strategic resources for its future development (Richards, 2019).
- Investing in the local infrastructure and public services to ensure the community’s quality of life (Al Haija, 2011).
- Identifying all the sources of conflict in tourism development such as natural resource management, visitation levels, preservation of cultural heritage, the allocation of human and

financial resources, and resolving them in manner that serves the interest of the local community, the private sector, the foreign organizations involved in the local tourism development and the public administration (Avramescu and Ungureanu, 2008; Košić, Demirović and Dragin, 2017; Bakas, Duxbury and Vinagre de Castro, 2019).

While the elements previously mentioned are not a foolproof recipe for rural tourism success, the current strategies for tourism development must be improved so that the rural areas can be revitalized. One such situation is also the case of Romanian rural tourism.

3. Discussion and conclusions

The potential for creative rural tourism in Romania

Rural tourism in Romania has not reached its full potential. In the 2006-2018 period, the number of tourists arrivals to boarding houses and agritourism boarding houses, the most used hospitality structures associated with the rural environment (Gherasim and Gherasim, 2017), had mostly a steady growth. However, when the numbers get divided between Romanian and foreign tourists, the picture becomes a bit more alarming: while it is evident that the number of Romanian tourists shows a healthy increase, the number of foreign tourists has a modest performance.

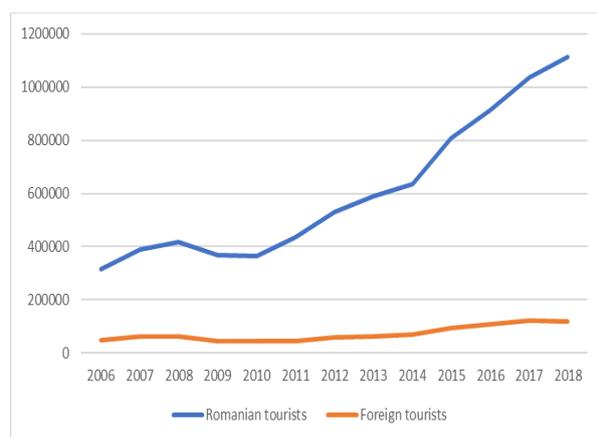


Figure 1. Romanian and foreign tourists' arrivals to boarding houses in the 2006-2018 period

(Source: author's work based on the data available from Institutul Național de Statistică, 2019)

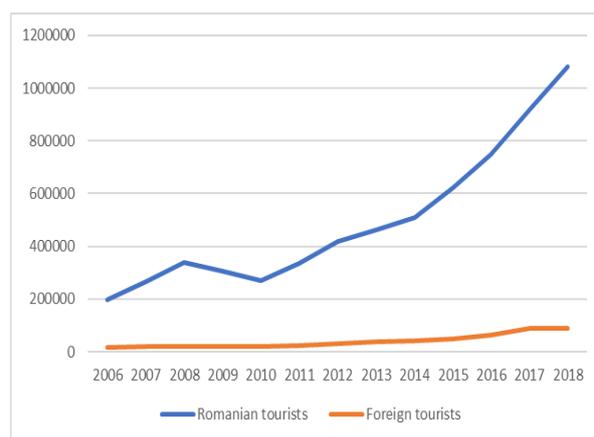


Figure 2. Romanian and foreign tourists' arrivals to agritourism boarding houses in the 2006-2018 period

(Source: author's work based on the data available from Institutul Național de Statistică, 2019)

A possible explanation is that after a period of growth, in which new accommodation units are built every year, Romanian rural destinations seem to enter a period of long-term stabilization (Cocean and Souca, 2018), but this stagnation can have adverse effects on the tourism offer since creativity has become a vital attractiveness indicator for tourists nowadays (Richards, 2018).

Moreover, Romania does not lack the cultural resources that can become the basis of an attractive creative rural tourism experience. As of 2017, Romania has seven elements of cultural heritage patrimony included on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Teodrescu et al., 2019): ritual folk dancing (i.e., "Călușul", the young men's ritual of "Ticuș"), music and singing (i.e., "Doina", Christmas caroling), traditional fabric weaving techniques, pottery and ceramics from Horezu, and "Mărțișorul" (i.e., ritualistic jewelry worn only at the beginning of spring). Especially relevant is the international exposure of traditional Romanian clothing, as folklore motifs have been incorporated in fashion, from local designers, all the way to luxury fashion as evidenced by Yves Saint Laurent collection "La blouse roumaine" (Mocenco et al., 2016). Most of these are not constrained to a specific region; all Romanian historical regions have their versions of cultural arts

and handicrafts (Constantin, 2010), ranging from painting crafts (e.g., glass icons) and wooden carvings, to traditional folk dances. Also, more and more Romanian villages have at least one village museum, or a memorial house dedicated to a local or national personality, and organize rural festivals deep stepped into the local traditions. Furthermore, according to the National Tourism Authority, in 2013, 1,067 Romanian artisans were practicing 24 artistic crafts, which could be included in a cultural tourism offer (Cojocariu, 2015).

Therefore, there is a wealthy artistic potential to be translated into creative workshops and unique artistic demonstrations that can provide an exciting experience for the creative tourist looking for authenticity. All that is needed is good leader and administration to recognize the potential for development, a local community involved in the planning process and committed on the long-term, artisans providing social entrepreneurship but also creative opportunities for the tourists looking for them, and, of course, internal and international tourists open to new experiences and willing to learn more about the culture they are visiting.

In conclusion, rural tourism development and rural area revitalization are not possible without the active involvement of the local community. Whether it is by selecting the best people to direct the change, by investing into the best tourism solutions for the area, and by sustaining and encouraging the local artisans to get involved in the overall tourism offer, it comes down to the residents of a specific area to realize they should have probably the most critical say in how things should be planned and developed in the long term. After all, when the tourists have left, it is the local community who must suffer the consequences if tourism is developed without a well-thought plan, or enjoy the benefits of a sustainable, inclusive rural tourism strategy.

4. Study limitations and future area for research

The main limitation of this article is the lack of primary research data from a case study on the community's involvement in rural tourism development on Romanian territory, and especially on the opportunity to introduce a creative rural tourism offer on the Romanian market. In the future, more primary research, combining interviews with the local administration, surveys for analyzing the involvement of the local population, and items for testing the potential for creative rural tourism should be constructed and applied at least in one Romanian historical rural area, while the results could then be used as tools to help local authorities and other concerned entities in developing better rural development strategies. Given the sparse academic Romanian literature focused on creative tourism, on creativity as an entrepreneurship pillar and not just a skill, and on the involvement of the local community on sustainable tourism development, this article opens several new and exciting avenues for research.

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