Eco-Tourism and Sustainable Development
https://journals.zycentre.com/etsd

ARTICLE

Reimagining Tourism: A Creative Model for Destinations Facing Negative Impacts

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ABSTRACT

Tourism has been recognized as a significant driver of economic growth across the globe. Nonetheless, numerous destinations are increasingly facing negative consequences, including the erosion of cultural heritage, authenticity and the emergence of environmental, social, and economic challenges that disproportionately affect local communities. In response to these issues, this paper proposes a theoretical model that positions creative tourism as an alternative to mitigate such adverse effects. By promoting creative experiences that engage both tourists and local stakeholders, the model encourages more inclusive, culturally grounded, and sustainable forms of tourism development. The study employs a qualitative methodology based on a theoretical modeling approach from the social sciences. This process includes a systematic overview of literature and analytical categories to address identified social problems. Data triangulation was used by integrating information from bibliographic sources, institutional reports, and ethnographic fieldwork used in diverse tourism destinations. Findings emphasize the relevance of placing tourist experiences at the center of destination planning and management, highlighting the interaction between experience design, cultural authenticity, and local participation. This research underscores how creative tourism, when thoughtfully implemented, has the potential to generate meaningful, sustainable impacts that benefit both visitors and host communities. Furthermore, the proposed model offers practical and conceptual tools for rethinking tourism practices through a more sustainable, culturally rich, and conscious lens.

Keywords: Creative Tourism; Overtourism; Destination Management; Creative Experiences

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ARTICLE INFO
Received: 10 January 2025 | Revised: 1 March 2025 | Accepted: 8 March 2025 | Published Online: 15 March 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63385/etsd.v1i1.117

CITATION
Hernández Matorel, M.D., 2025. Reimagining Tourism: A Creative Model for Destinations Facing Negative Impacts. Eco-Tourism and Sustainable Development. 1(1): 27–41. DOI: https://doi.org/10.63385/etsd.v1i1.117

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1. Introduction

Tourism has been notable as a driver activity for economic development, cultural exchange, and regional identity. For many cities and towns around the world, the tourism sector represents a vital source of income, employment, and international visibility. In 2019 alone, tourism accounted for 10.4% of global GDP and supported over 330 million jobs worldwide[1]. Furthermore, the 2025 world tourism barometer from World Tourism Organization maintains the activity growth in different regions such as Africa, America and the Pacific in international arrivals[2]. However, the rapid and often unregulated growth of tourism in many destinations has led to what is now widely recognized as overtourism, a phenomenon where the number of visitors exceeds the local carrying capacity, resulting in significant socio-environmental and cultural degradation[3, 4].

Cities such as Barcelona, Mexico City, Paris, Venice, Amsterdam, Medellín, and Dubrovnik have become examples of overtourism, facing a range of issues including inflated housing markets, loss of cultural authenticity, environmental strain, and social tensions between residents and visitors[5, 6]. In such contexts, the quality of life for local populations is increasingly compromised, while the tourist experience itself is often losing its heritage and authenticity.

These impacts raise urgent questions about the sustainability of traditional tourism models and call for a critical rethinking of how tourism is conceptualized, developed, and managed, especially in the post-pandemic era, where recovery efforts may either repeat past mistakes or open space for more inclusive, sustainable models.

Tourism's growth, while economically beneficial, has also exacerbated inequalities and placed mounting pressure on natural, social, and cultural systems. The phenomenon of overtourism is not merely a symptom of popularity; it is often the outcome of poor governance, unbalanced economic priorities, and unchecked market forces[3]. Mass tourism models frequently prioritize visitor volume and short-term gains over long-term sustainability and local well-being. For example, in Venice, an overreliance on cruise ship arrivals has contributed to environmental degradation, depopulation, and cultural commodification[5]. In Barcelona, local protests have highlighted issues of housing affordability, overcrowded public services, and loss of neighborhood identity[6]. These cases illustrate that tourism, when not well managed, can undermine the very communities and environments that attract visitors in the first place.

The causes of overtourism are multifaceted. On the supply side, aggressive marketing campaigns, digital platforms, and low-cost carriers have increased accessibility to popular destinations. On the demand side, the rise of the "Instagrammable" experience, bucket-list travel, and consumerist patterns has intensified pressures on a narrow set of iconic sites[7]. Also, tourism policies often favor centralized growth in already popular hubs, leaving peripheral or rural destinations underdeveloped and underutilized. The result is a concentration of visitors in limited geographies, creating socio-environmental imbalances that threaten the resilience of both ecosystems and local cultures. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of this model, prompting calls from scholars and global organizations to "build back better" through regenerative and inclusive tourism strategies[8].

Despite these challenges, tourism remains a fundamental economic and cultural activity for many communities across the globe. It contributes to job creation, fosters intercultural dialogue, and supports local businesses, particularly in regions with limited industrial or agricultural alternatives[1]. Beyond its economic value, tourism can strengthen social cohesion by enhancing community pride, preserving traditions, and encouraging the protection of heritage assets. For small towns and emerging destinations, especially in post-industrial or rural contexts, tourism offers a platform to reimagine local identity and diversify livelihoods.

In this context, creative tourism emerges as a promising alternative. Rooted in local culture, participation, and co-creation, creative tourism promotes meaningful engagement between visitors and host communities while supporting cultural preservation and economic diversification[9, 10]. Rather than focusing on high-volume visitation, this approach emphasizes quality, authenticity, and community empowerment. Recent studies have highlighted the role of creative tourism in revitalizing small towns and peripheral regions, particularly those seeking to differentiate themselves from saturated tourist markets[11, 12].

Given the growing urgency to develop tourism models that are both sustainable and inclusive, this research investigates the potential of creative tourism as a response to the complex challenges posed by overtourism. It focuses on how

creative, community-driven approaches can not only mitigate negative impacts in overburdened destinations but also serve as a development pathway for small or emerging urban areas seeking to build more resilient tourism economies. Creative tourism emphasizes co-creation, local culture, and active participation, offering a viable alternative to volume-based tourism that often disregards the needs of residents and ecosystems. This study is conducted by the research question: How can creative tourism serve as a model to mitigate the impacts of overtourism while supporting sustainable development in destinations?

The study adopts a comparative case approach, analyzing different overtouristed destinations alongside centers experimenting with creative tourism initiatives. The research aims to assess whether creative tourism can foster more balanced, community-centered tourism models. Furthermore, this project seeks to systematize a theoretical model that provides a replicable framework for cities facing these challenges. In doing so, it contributes to both academic literature and policy development in the field of sustainable and regenerative tourism.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. An Approach for Overtourism

Overtourism has emerged as one of the most critical challenges facing global tourism systems in the 21st century. Broadly defined, it refers to the situation where the number of tourists at a destination exceeds the social, environmental, or infrastructural capacity to manage them effectively. This leads to negative consequences for both residents and visitors, including environmental degradation, cultural dilution, economic inequality, and social unrest. As articulated by Milano, Cheer, and Novelli [3], overtourism is not simply about numbers but about the way tourism interacts with space, governance, and local communities. The UNWTO further describes overtourism as occurring when "the impact of tourism, on a destination, or parts thereof, exceeds acceptable limits," underscoring the systemic nature of the issue [13].

The causes of overtourism are multidimensional and often interrelated. From the supply side, the unchecked growth of the global tourism industry, supported by aggressive destination marketing and the expansion of low-cost carriers, has increased accessibility to even the most fragile destinations. The rapid rise of digital platforms like Airbnb, TripAdvisor, and Instagram has also contributed to visitor overconcentration by promoting the same iconic sites across the globe. On the governance side, urban planning and tourism policy often lag behind market dynamics, failing to implement limits, redistribute flows, or involve local communities in decision-making processes [6, 7]. Simultaneously, tourist behavior has shifted toward what Peeters et al. call "instantaneous gratification," where experiential consumption and the pursuit of visually appealing content drive travel choices, further intensifying the spatial and temporal concentration of tourism activity [14].

The impacts of overtourism are typically categorized into environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions. Environmentally, destinations may experience overuse of natural resources, pollution, increased carbon emissions, and degradation of sensitive ecosystems. These are particularly visible in island and coastal regions where water, land, and energy systems are already under pressure such as Barcelona, Cancún, Maya Bay, Cartagena, Santa Marta, etc. Socio-culturally, overtourism contributes to the gentrification of historic centers, the rise in housing costs due to the expansion of short-term rentals, and the commodification of local culture. This process often leads to a loss of identity and a growing sense of alienation among residents [5]. Economically, while tourism may boost revenues, it also fosters dependency on a single sector, creates seasonal volatility, and exacerbates inequalities when benefits are captured by external actors or large corporations [3]. In destinations like Venice, Barcelona, Dubrovnik, or Amsterdam, these impacts have become highly visible and politically contested, sparking grassroots mobilizations and public debates on the limits of tourism.

To address these challenges, a range of models and strategies has been proposed and implemented with varying levels of success. Traditional carrying capacity frameworks attempt to establish thresholds for acceptable visitor numbers based on physical and social criteria. However, critics argue these are static and fail to account for the dynamic nature of tourism flows and community resilience. More adaptive approaches include visitor dispersion strategies, which aim to redirect tourists toward lesser-known areas or promote off-season travel to reduce peak stress on in-

frastructure and public space[14]. Smart tourism initiatives, leveraging digital technologies and real-time data, have also gained traction as tools for managing congestion, guiding visitor behavior, and improving service delivery[15]. Importantly, a growing number of destinations are shifting toward resident-centered governance, involving communities in tourism planning and prioritizing well-being over growth metrics[13]. Despite these efforts, many responses remain reactive and managerial, rather than transformational. This gap underscores the need for alternative, systemic approaches, such as creative tourism, that challenge the dominant logics of volume-driven tourism and offer new pathways for destination development.

2.2. Theoretical Principles of Creative Tourism

Creative tourism emerged as a distinct response to the saturation of traditional cultural tourism, aligning with broader socio-economic transformations in the late 20th century. Its conceptual roots are closely intertwined with the evolution of the experience economy, which reflects a societal shift from industrial production to experience-oriented consumption. This transition, described by authors like Toffler and Bell[16, 17], marked the decline of material production as the primary economic driver, giving way to a post-industrial society focused on services, knowledge, and symbolic goods. In this new context, consumption was no longer about acquiring products, but about living meaningful, personalized, and memorable experiences.

The theoretical grounding of creative tourism is therefore inseparable from this experiential turn. While early conceptualizations of the experience economy can be traced to works by Holbrook & Hirschman[18], Schulze[19], and Pine & Gilmore[20], the notion of creative tourism was first formally introduced by Richards & Raymond[9]. They defined it as "tourism which offers visitors the opportunity to develop their creative potential through active participation in learning experiences that are characteristic of the destination." This definition positioned creative tourism as an active, co-creative, and place-based form of tourism that differs substantially from traditional sightseeing or passive cultural consumption. While earlier tourism models prioritized aesthetic or contemplative experiences, creative tourism demands active involvement, where visitors become both producers and consumers, what Toffler termed "prosumers"[16].

Creative tourism is thus considered part of a second-generation experiential tourism paradigm, in which the experience is not merely designed by providers, but emerges through the interaction between visitor, host, and place[21]. Scholars such as Tan et al.[22], Campos et al.[23]. and Duxbury & Richards[10], have emphasized the role of co-creation in creative tourism, where tourists engage in hands-on activities such as crafts, cooking, performance, storytelling, or artistic collaboration, that allow them to connect deeply with local culture. This emphasis on agency and immersion reflects a broader change in tourist motivations, which now center on identity, authenticity, and participation.

Creative tourism has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, both conceptually and in practice. Initially framed as localized initiatives led by small businesses offering differentiated experiences (CT 1.0), it evolved into a model linked to territorial planning and development (CT 2.0), followed by an expansion of creative activities embedded in destinations (CT 3.0), and is now increasingly understood through the lens of co-creation and active visitor participation (CT 4.0). This evolution has been accompanied by a growing body of theoretical and empirical research[24]. Creative experiences are now widely recognized as the outcome of visitor engagement in local culture through both the production and consumption of experiences.

From a theoretical position, three key perspectives help to frame creative tourism as an experiential model: the demand side (tourist-centered), the supply side (experience design), and the destination management perspective. On the demand side, creative tourism responds to the growing desire among travelers for authentic, meaningful experiences that reflect their personal values and identity. As Campos et al.[23] and Booyens & Rogerson note[4], the tourist is not a passive recipient but a co-creator of meaning, and their motivations, emotions, and participation are central to the quality of the experience. Tan et al. further highlight how motivations such as learning, cultural connection, and self-expression drive tourist engagement in creative activities[25].

On the supply side, the experience must be carefully crafted to stimulate participation, engagement, and emotional resonance. Pine & Gilmore emphasized that experiences should be "staged" to create memorable encounters[20], while Sundbo & Sørensen argue that experience creation involves not only the service provider but also the cultural and sym-

bolic dimensions embedded in the offering[26]. Richards & Raymond similarly highlight the importance of activities that develop the visitor's creative capital[9], suggesting that creative tourism hinges on enabling people to do, make, and express themselves.

The third perspective involves the role of the destination as a space where experiences are both facilitated and contextualized. Scholars such as Maitland[27], Richards & Marques[28], and De Bruin & Jelinčić emphasize the importance of urban design, public space, events, and cultural infrastructure as enablers of creative tourism[29]. These authors argue that cities and regions must act as experience platforms, where creative encounters are supported not only by businesses or individuals, but also by public institutions, policy frameworks, and community engagement. Creative tourism thus becomes a strategic tool for place-making, cultural revitalization, and destination differentiation.

Creative tourism operates at the intersection of experience consumption and cultural production. It reflects both a paradigm shift in how people travel and what they seek, and a strategic response by destinations to offer more sustainable, participatory, and locally embedded forms of tourism. Understanding its theoretical principles, rooted in the economy of experience, co-creation, and cultural immersion, provides a critical foundation for exploring its potential as an alternative to mass tourism and a model for destinations facing overtourism.

2.3. From Theory to Practice: Models and Approaches

As overtourism has become a global concern for both mature and emerging destinations, a growing body of research has attempted to move from abstract conceptualization toward operational frameworks and management models that allow for better diagnosis, prediction, and intervention. These practical approaches vary in scale and focus, ranging from quantitative simulation tools to stakeholder-based governance strategies and destination-wide planning frameworks.

One component of applied research focuses on quantitative and simulation models, which allow policymakers to anticipate the impacts of tourism growth and test the effectiveness of mitigation strategies. A recent example is the Agent-Based model (ABM) developed in Santa Marta, Colombia, by Parada et al.[30], designed for urban contexts experiencing overtourism. This model simulates tourist and resident behavior, allowing destination managers to evaluate the implications of various policy decisions, such as access restrictions, pricing, and zoning. Similarly, Giove et al. proposed a linear programming model to simulate sustainable development scenarios in Venice[31], incorporating environmental and social carrying capacities to help regulate tourist flows. These models are particularly useful in high-density, urbanized destinations where congestion and resident pushback are immediate concerns.

Beyond simulation tools, other authors have proposed normative and diagnostic models to frame overtourism within broader sustainability paradigms. Mihalič introduced a sustainability-based framework that categorizes overtourism not only as an excess of tourist numbers but as a mismatch between tourism impacts and stakeholder perceptions[32]. This model includes dimensions such as ecological footprint, economic balance, and community well-being, offering a more holistic tool for identifying thresholds of acceptability. Likewise, Tarrant et al. developed a normative model of overtourism[33], emphasizing the perceptual gap between visitors and residents as a key driver of social friction and resistance to tourism. These frameworks have contributed to rethinking overtourism as a relational and political problem, rather than a purely quantitative one.

There are also place-based strategies and destination planning approaches aimed at redistributing tourism flows and involving communities in governance. Drapela documented how rural destinations in the Czech Republic have developed localized strategies to mitigate overtourism through spatial dispersion, community-based planning, and the promotion of less-visited regions[34]. In a similar vein, Lagarias et al. proposed a methodological framework for assessing overtourism in insular territories[35], which incorporates spatial, cultural, and productivity-related indicators to guide sustainable development decisions in fragile island contexts.

Despite their diversity, most of these models tend to focus on managing the effects of overtourism, rather than transforming the underlying tourism paradigm. This is where creative tourism introduces an alternative approach rooted in experience co-creation, cultural authenticity, and local empowerment. Rather than focusing on volume management, creative tourism reimagines what is offered, how it

is consumed, and by whom. Scholars like Richards and Marques [28], De Bruin and Jelinčić [29], and Duxbury and Richards have proposed conceptual and operational frameworks that position creative tourism not only as a niche [10], but as a strategic model for tourism development, particularly for smaller cities and destinations seeking to diversify and regenerate.

In particular, Richards suggests a value chain model of creative tourism in which destinations generate cultural value through collaborative production processes involving local residents, artists, and entrepreneurs [36]. This model promotes high-value, low-impact tourism by encouraging visitors to engage in meaningful, place-based activities. De Bruin and Jelinčić offer a participatory experience tourism model, emphasizing the need for inclusive governance and local ownership of tourism development [29]. These models are consistent with broader calls for regenerative tourism, where tourism is not only less harmful but actively contributes to the socio-cultural and economic renewal of host communities.

While models of overtourism mitigation offer valuable tools for controlling growth and managing impacts, creative tourism represents a transformational approach. By shifting the focus from quantity to quality, from passive to active engagement, and from top-down planning to participatory co-creation, creative tourism offers a promising pathway for destinations seeking to recover, diversify, or resist overtourism pressures.

3. Materials and Methods

This research adopts a qualitative method to explore the potential of creative tourism as a strategic response to overtourism and as a development opportunity for destinations seeking alternative tourism models. Guided by an interpretive paradigm, the study employs theoretical-practical modeling as proposed by Deroncele-Acosta et al. [36], which provides a methodological framework rooted in social sciences and aimed at resolving concrete problems through integrated theoretical and practical components. This approach emphasizes an inductive-deductive logic that emerges from praxis, particularly from systematic experiences in doctoral research contexts, and is designed to construct holistic, problem-solving models grounded in qualitative research.

The modeling framework relies on three interconnected elements:

a) A tool category, constructed a priori and composed of organized theoretical elements built by the researcher, which functions as a conceptual lever;
b) A practical process or set of actions that operationalize this category, enabling it to be applied to a diagnosed social problem;
c) The target category, which contains the identified problem and is the focus of transformation. The articulation of these components is not linear or isolated, but rather structured holistically, aiming to generate theoretical-practical contributions to the resolution of real-world challenges in tourism contexts.

Within this framework, the study integrates three complementary data sources through a process of triangulation:

- A bibliographic review of academic literature and conceptual debates in creative tourism, overtourism, and sustainable place-based development;
- An ethnographic approach involving fieldwork, site visits, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with key actors (including cultural producers, entrepreneurs, and visitors) was carried out across a diverse range of culturally significant and tourism-driven destinations. Fieldwork in Latin America included Medellín, Barichara, Buenaventura, Cartagena, and Barranquilla in Colombia; Mazatlán, Tequila, Rivera Maya, and Mérida in México; Lima and Cuzco in Perú; Suchitoto in El Salvador; and Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic. In Europe, research took place at the British Museum in London, as well as in Barcelona, Spain, and Burano, Italy. Additional fieldwork was conducted in Washington, D.C., United States, and in Dedza, Malawi, Africa;
- A documentary content analysis of institutional reports, local tourism plans, and strategic frameworks produced by governance bodies and community stakeholders.

This triangulated design enables a robust understanding of how creative tourism is conceptualized, implemented, and experienced across diverse urban and territorial contexts. The ethnographic orientation captures the lived experiences of tourism stakeholders, the cultural dynamics embedded in creative activities, and the spatial and symbolic dimensions

of visitor-host interactions. It also focuses on how creativity is mobilized as a development resource, particularly in relation to local identities and community needs.

The logic of triangulation is grounded in purposive sampling, selecting destinations that reflect diverse stages of tourism development and governance arrangements. Some cases are marked by high tourism concentration and overtourism impacts, while others are in transition or are emerging as creative destinations or are part of the Creative Tourism Network or Creative Cities Network.

By synthesizing insights from theoretical categories, empirical practices, and documented policies, this methodological model offers a comprehensive, problem-centered framework that aligns with the holistic and integrative orientation. It contributes not only to academic understanding, but also to practical strategies for managing tourism in sustainable sensitive ways.

4. Results

This research introduces a model developed to understand how creative tourism can function as a strategic response to overtourism in different destinations. The model is grounded in field observations, content analysis, and bibliographical overview. The findings suggest that creative tourism offers more than just an alternative set of activities; it proposes a different logic of how tourism can be redesigned, consumed, and governed. In contrast to mass tourism approaches that prioritize volume, efficiency, and standardization, creative tourism emphasizes co-creation, authenticity, and community engagement. These values become operative when certain enabling conditions are present in the destination ecosystem.

The model proposes that successful creative tourism systems emerge at the intersections of the three dimensions:

- Experience design, which refers to how tourism experiences are structured, curated, and delivered.
- Tourist-centeredness, which focuses on the motivations, behaviors, and participation of visitors.
- Destination management, which involves the policies, institutions, and infrastructures that regulate and support tourism activity.

Each of these perspectives contains unique subcategories (See **Figure 1**), but the intersections between them are where creative tourism is categorized. For example, the overlap between experience design and destination management reveals how local institutions and governance frameworks shape the quality and sustainability of experiences. The connection between experience design and the tourist-centered perspective highlights the importance of aligning visitor motivations with participatory formats. And the link between tourist-centeredness and destination management exposes how destinations must not only plan for tourists but also adapt based on evolving expectations, values, and social impacts.

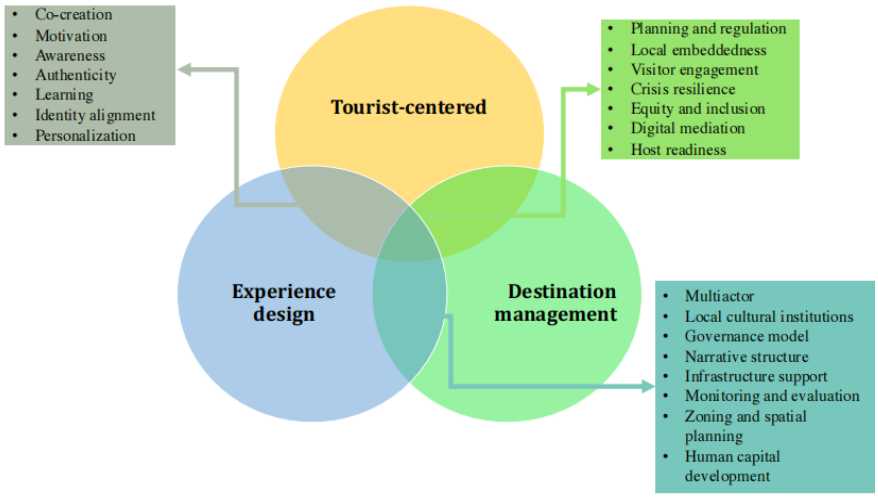

Figure 1. Creative Model for Destinations.

Author's Own Elaboration.

In the center of the model is the creative tourism zone. This shape represents destinations that are able to offer tourism experiences that are locally grounded, collaboratively created, visitor-responsive, and sustainably managed. These are the places where creative tourism can meaningfully contribute to mitigating the pressures of overtourism by dispersing flows, regenerating cultural value, and fostering mutual learning between hosts and guests.

According to the methodological approach adopted in this research, grounded in the theoretical-practical modeling framework proposed by Deroncele-Acosta et al. [37], the construction of the analytical model requires the articulation of three core components: the target category, the tool category, and the practical process. These components are structurally interrelated and allow for a holistic understanding of the social reality under study, as well as the formulation of contextually grounded solutions. In this framework, the target category refers to the diagnosed problematic situation, in this case, the negative impacts on tourism destinations. The tool category encompasses the conceptual and theoretical elements proposed to address and transform that reality, with a focus on creative tourism, co-creation, and experience-based design. The practical process refers to the set of subcategories and methodological strategies that operationalize the theoretical proposal and make its application viable in real-world contexts. These elements are presented in an integrated manner in **Table** 1 [37], which organizes the categories and their respective subcomponents as the foundation of the proposed model.

Table 1. A Creative Model for Destination Facing Negative Impacts.

Target Category	Tool Categories	Practical Process(Subcategories)
Negative impacts experienced by tourism destinations	Experience design–Destination management	Multiactor Local cultural institutions Governance model Narrative structure Infrastructure support Monitoring and evaluation Zoning and spatial planning Human capital development
	Experience design–tourist-centered	Co-creation Motivation Awareness Authenticity Learning Identity alignment Personalization
	Tourist-centered–Destination management	Planning and regulation Local embeddedness Visitor engagement Crisis resilience Equity and inclusion Digital mediation Host readiness

Source: Author's own elaboration based on methods used by Deroncele-Acosta et al. [37].

4.1. Experience Design and Destination Management

The intersection between Experience Design and Destination Management is foundational in the development of creative tourism strategies that are contextually grounded, sustainable, and resilient. This axis of the model explores how creative tourism experiences are conceptualized and operationalized within the structural, institutional, and regulatory frameworks of the destination. It emphasizes the importance of collaborative governance, cultural infrastructure, and narrative coherence, all of which are necessary to develop and sustain creative offerings that align with local values and broader policy goals.

- *Multiactor Collaboration:* Effective creative tourism

models rely on the active engagement of a diverse array of actors, including public entities, private stakeholders, community organizations, artists, and cultural entrepreneurs. The collaborative process allows for a diversity of perspectives, leading to more inclusive and innovative experience design[10, 38]. During ethnographic fieldwork in Medellín, Colombia, the Red Turismo Creativo del Distrito de Medellín emerged as an example of a multiactor network. This ecosystem includes cultural operators, municipal agencies, and social innovators working together to develop creative tourism initiatives. This coordinated action increases coherence and resilience in the tourism ecosystem, because it helps them to underscore the social impacts that this city is currently experiencing in terms of gentrification, sexual tourism, etc.

- *Local Cultural Institutions* play an important role in anchoring creative tourism experiences within heritage and knowledge frameworks. They offer both symbolic and practical legitimacy, acting as venues, curators, and knowledge brokers[27, 28]. In London, institutions like the British Museum actively co-create experiences with visitors, such as artist-led workshops and participatory installations. Such participation transforms these institutions from passive repositories of culture to active sites of co-creation, reinforcing their public mission while generating new experiential formats that support sustainable visitor engagement.
- *Governance Models* influence how destinations coordinate tourism development, mediate conflicting interests, and allocate resources. In creative tourism, a networked governance model is often more effective than top-down planning, as it allows for flexibility, co-management, and the integration of diverse actors[39]. Cities like Barcelona have adopted collaborative governance models that integrate creative industries, tourism boards, and residents to plan experiences that are locally rooted yet globally visible[40].
- *Narrative structures* are not storytelling strategies; they are interpretive frameworks through which tourists make sense of their experiences. They shape expectations, emotional resonance, and memory. Creative tourism thrives on rich, layered narratives that allow visitors to engage with local culture in meaningful ways[41, 42]. A visit to Cusco, Peru, exemplifies this dynamic. There, creative experiences, such as textile workshops or Andean cooking classes, are deeply embedded within the broader narrative of indigenous heritage and Incan cosmology, offering a coherent and emotionally engaging journey.
- *Infrastructure support* such as venues, equipment, public spaces, and logistical resources that enable creative encounters[26]. In Washington D.C., museums and cultural centers offer co-creation experiences that include hands-on exhibitions, participatory art, and guided design workshops, demonstrating how high-capacity infrastructure can foster immersive, inclusive tourism. However, such infrastructure need not be grand. Community centers, libraries, or even private homes can become effective spaces for hosting creative experiences, especially in small or emerging destinations. For example, a small town such as Barichara in Colombia has exploded with workshops for painting, tailoring, and music. These workshops are scenarios for tourists to co-create and know more about the local creativity.
- *Monitoring and Evaluation:* creative tourism requires mechanisms for feedback, measurement, and adaptive management. Monitoring helps destinations understand visitor preferences, measure impacts, and adjust strategies over time[32]. Organizations like the Creative Tourism Network® have established frameworks to certify and evaluate creative tourism destinations, providing a useful reference for best practices and benchmarking.
- *Zoning and Spatial Planning:* creative tourism can play a significant role in rebalancing tourism spatially, activating non-traditional neighborhoods[43], and spreading visitor flows beyond overburdened tourist zones. Spatial strategies can highlight untapped local assets and encourage engagement with everyday urban or rural life[14]. In Mazatlán, Mexico, a creative food operator described taking tourists outside the tourism area to local markets, where residents explain ingredient choices and traditional uses, followed by a cooking session in private homes. This also contributes to local economies and neighborhood revitalization.
- *Human Capital Development:* No creative tourism system can function without skilled, motivated, and lo-

cally embedded facilitators. Investment in training, entrepreneurship support, and creative capacity-building is essential [25]. In cities such as Lima and Burano, several local initiatives work with artisans and cultural producers to develop storytelling, hospitality, and digital marketing skills, directly linking human development goals with sustainable tourism practices.

4.2. Experience Design and Tourist-Centered Perspectives

The intersection between Experience Design and the Tourist-Centered Perspective explores how creative tourism experiences are shaped not only by what is offered, but by how visitors perceive, participate in, and connect with those offerings. In this context, tourists are no longer passive consumers but prosumers of meaning and value, and the success of creative experiences depends on how well they engage with tourists' motivations, identities, expectations, and learning desires. Creative tourism, as conceptualized by Richards and Raymond [9], places tourists at the center of the experience process by offering them the chance to develop their creative potential through active participation. This might require experienced designers to take into account diverse internal and cultural dimensions of tourist behavior, crafting experiences that are engaging, personalized, and emotionally resonant.

- *Co-creation* is the foundational principle of creative tourism. Unlike traditional tourism models, where the tourist is a spectator, creative tourism invites the visitor to become an active participant in the creation of cultural value [21, 25]. This can take the form of art-making, cooking, crafting, storytelling, or performing, all activities that involve symbolic, emotional, and sometimes even physical labor. For example, during field observations in Tequila, México, workshops led by local people allowed visitors not just to observe, but to co-participate in the industrial tequila-making process, establishing a shared creative practice that was both memorable and respectful. Moreover, co-creation often produces unique and unrepeatable moments, increasing the personal value of the experience and encouraging deeper tourist satisfaction and loyalty [44].
- Understanding tourist *motivation* is essential for designing experiences that truly resonate. According to Tan et al. [25], tourists engaging in creative tourism are often driven by intrinsic motivations such as self-expression, self-development, and the desire for authenticity, rather than status or escapism. Their taxonomy of creative tourists identifies different profiles from novelty seekers to skill builders and suggests that designing experiences aligned with these motivations can increase engagement and satisfaction. In this sense, creative tourism can be viewed as a transformational form of travel, appealing especially to tourists looking for meaning, introspection, or personal growth. The model proposed in this study integrates motivation as both a starting point for tourist decision-making and a reference for experience designers to adapt offerings according to evolving tourist psychologies.
- Closely linked to motivation is *awareness*, which refers not only to awareness of the destination but also to cultural sensitivity, environmental consciousness, and ethical reflection. Tan et al. also highlight that creative tourist often possesses higher levels of awareness and seek experiences that align with their values and worldviews [25]. Destinations can foster this awareness through pre-experience communication and on-site education. For example, a small town, Suchitoto, El Salvador, participatory tour about natural coloring is not only a creative activity but also a vehicle for raising awareness about gender and domestic violence. These invite tourists and locals to co-create, share traditions, and also build both cultural and peace empathy (See **Figure 2**).
- *Authenticity* remains a cornerstone of creative tourism theory and practice. Unlike superficial tourist performances or staged attractions, creative tourism emphasizes "negotiated authenticity", where the experience is co-produced and culturally rooted, even if adapted to tourism contexts [38, 45]. Visitors value creative experiences that feel real, unrehearsed, and emotionally sincere. This authenticity can be material (e.g., using traditional tools), social (e.g., engaging directly with artisans), or symbolic (e.g., connecting to heritage or identity). Several authors highlight how authenticity in creative tourism strengthens cultural sustainability while avoiding the commodification trap [10, 29].

- *Learning:* is another core sub-category in the tourist-centered approach to creative experience. These experiences are inherently pedagogical, offering knowledge that can be technical (craft, language), historical (heritage, stories), or environmental (local practices). In creative tourism, learning is experiential, because it happens through doing, not just observing. This aligns with Kolb's experiential learning theory [46], which emphasizes learning as a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. In several destinations analyzed, creative tourism experiences incorporated learning objectives, from cooking techniques in local kitchens to dance lessons rooted in community traditions.
- *Identity Alignment:* Tourist experiences are often chosen not only based on curiosity but also as acts of identity affirmation. When tourists feel that an experience reflects their personal values, lifestyle, or aspirations, the result is a deeper, more meaningful engagement [47, 48].For example, in Barranquilla, Colombia new environmental experiences such as mangrove planting or turtle release ceremonies in Buenaventura, Colombia have become popular among tourists who see themselves as responsible, eco-conscious, or socially engaged. Identity alignment is a critical consideration for creative tourism design, particularly in a post-industrial tourism context where values-based consumption is on the rise.
- *Personalization* is a defining trait of successful creative experiences. Unlike mass tourism products, which offer standardized routes and fixed schedules, creative tourism operators often adapt experiences to individual preferences, whether in terms of timing, intensity, content, or language. In various field cases, operators described tailoring experiences to the needs of specific tourist groups, family-friendly versions, expert-level workshops, or thematic variations. This adaptability not only improves satisfaction but allows for greater inclusiveness, welcoming different demographics and skill levels [23]. Digital platforms and communication tools have also enhanced personalization, allowing pre-trip interaction and real-time customization, making tourists feel seen, valued, and empowered.



Figure 2. Visual Record of Local Houses Involved in Awareness Practices.
Source: Author's Own. Pictures Were Taken During Ethnographic Field Visit in Suchitoto, El Salvador on January 25th, 2022. The Signs in the Images Read: "In This House, We Want a Life Free of Violence Against Women".

4.3. Tourist-Centered and Destination Management

The intersection between the Tourist-Centered Perspective and Destination Management emphasizes how destinations adapt their institutional and regulatory structures to accommodate the needs, expectations, and well-being of visitors, while also protecting local communities. In creative tourism, this intersection is especially significant: it is where questions of access, participation, regulation, and resilience meet the evolving behaviors and values of contemporary travelers. Unlike traditional tourism governance, which often

treats the tourist as a passive figure to be managed through zoning and flow control, this intersection requires a dialogical approach, engaging visitors as active participants in the sustainability of the destination and vice versa. As tourists become more conscious, diverse, and value-driven, destination managers must respond with flexible strategies that adopt not only high-quality experiences, but also fairness, responsiveness, and long-term viability.

- *Planning and regulation* are essential to ensure that tourism development aligns with broader urban or regional goals, protects residents' quality of life, and responds to changing visitor patterns. In creative tourism, where experiences are often decentralized and community-based, planning must be participatory and adaptive. For example, Amsterdam has recently shifted from reactive tourism regulation to a more forward-thinking framework, integrating creative industry development with cultural tourism strategies. This has included limiting Airbnb licenses in key areas while promoting creative workshops and events in peripheral neighborhoods as alternatives. Such strategic regulation ensures that tourism growth remains manageable and socially balanced, while amplifying local creative economies. Planning also implies investment in capacity-building, zoning, and tourism carrying capacity studies, allowing for informed and inclusive decision-making processes that benefit all the stakeholders.
- *Local embeddedness* refers to how deeply tourism experiences are connected to the daily life, values, and rhythms of the destination. In creative tourism, embedding tourism in local systems ensures authenticity, resilience, and stronger community support [49]. In Malawi, for instance, creative tourism experiences are often organized by locals and hosted in private homes or public alleys. This form of embeddedness turns the visitor into a temporary local, deepening the cultural exchange and economic benefit while resisting the detachment and alienation seen in mass tourism zones.
- In creative tourism, *visitor engagement:* is not limited to satisfaction surveys or Instagram posts. It involves real-time participation, emotional connection, and meaning-making. Destination managers play a critical role in enabling this through design, communication, and facilitation. In Merida, México initiatives such as cooking workshops are designed with structured reflection moments, where visitors not only learn recipes but also reflect on their own creative processes and cultural assumptions of the local culture. High levels of engagement also reduce tourist fatigue and commodification, leading to more sustainable forms of tourism and increased retention. Engaged visitors are more likely to become ambassadors for the destination, amplifying its visibility through word-of-mouth and online advocacy.
- *Crisis Resilience:* The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the importance of crisis resilience in tourism planning. Creative tourism, with its small-scale, local, and flexible character, has shown notable advantages in maintaining operation and adaptation under stress [50]. In Funchal, Madeira, creative tourism operators quickly adapted during lockdowns by offering online embroidery classes and storytelling sessions. Destination management strategies should therefore build adaptive capacity, integrating risk mitigation, diversification of experiences, and hybrid digital-physical formats into tourism planning.
- *Equity and Inclusion:* Tourism often reflects and reinforces inequalities, especially in destinations where benefits are concentrated in commercial areas. Creative tourism, with its emphasis on small-scale production and co-creation, offers opportunities to widen access and diversify participation. In Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, tourism programs have partnered with local centers in different rural areas to make tourists part of the tobacco-making process. These programs not only offer authentic cultural experiences, but also contribute to social inclusion, employment, and empowerment. For destination managers, this means working to ensure equitable distribution of tourism revenues, accessibility for marginalized groups, and gender-sensitive programming. Inclusion also refers to the diversity of tourists, ensuring that experiences are adaptable to different languages, mobility needs, and backgrounds.
- *Digital Mediation* has become central to tourism, especially in how tourists discover, book, and share their experiences. In creative tourism, digital mediation goes beyond marketing: it facilitates personalization, pre-engagement, and even remote participation. For example, Booking platforms such as Airbnb Experiences, Get

Your Guide, Tripadvisor, and GuruWalk offer tailored suggestions based on previous visits or artistic interests. After the visit, apps offer ways to stay connected with artisans or communities extending the lifecycle of the experience. Destination managers must promote digital infrastructure and literacy, ensuring that local creators and hosts can participate in and benefit from this transformation.

- *Host Readiness:* While visitor expectations are increasingly shaped by co-creation, personalization, and cultural engagement, the capacity of hosts to deliver such experiences remains a crucial factor. Host readiness includes not only technical skills but also emotional intelligence, intercultural competence, and business know-how. In Colombia, a public initiative trained residents from Santa Cruz de Mompox, San Martín, Barichara, Calima El Darién, Mocoa, Valledupar, San José del Guaviare and Tumaco in creative experience and cultural tourism. Destination managers should support training, mentorship, and well-being programs for hosts, recognizing that the quality of tourist-host interaction often determines the practices of creative experiences.

5. Conclusions

This research presents a comprehensive analysis of creative tourism as a strategic and multidimensional response to the challenges posed by overtourism, while simultaneously fostering development opportunities in emerging destinations. The proposed model, grounded in the three interrelated tool categories, offers a framework that captures the complex, dynamic interactions necessary for building sustainable and regenerative tourism ecosystems.

The study highlights how the intersections among the model's pillars reveal critical synergies and practical mechanisms that enable creative tourism to transition from a niche alternative toward a regenerative paradigm. Collectively, these intersections form a holistic, adaptable model that encourages decentralization of tourist flows, activation of local economies, and the strengthening of cultural vitality. This model contributes theoretically by integrating governance, experience design, and visitor engagement in a participatory framework, and practically by providing actionable insights for destinations seeking to implement creative tourism as a tool for sustainable transformation.

Despite its strengths, this research has several limitations. Some regions with differing governance structures or tourism dynamics may face unique challenges not fully captured in the research. Second, the study's timeframe did not allow for longitudinal assessment of the long-term impacts of creative tourism initiatives on destination sustainability, resilience, and socio-economic equity. Furthermore, while digital mediation emerged as a critical enabler, the rapid evolution of technology and its uneven access across communities pose challenges for implementation that require ongoing investigation.

Building on this foundation, future research could explore several promising avenues:

- Investigate the long-term socio-economic and cultural impacts of creative tourism initiatives across various destination types, including rural communities, to understand sustainability and resilience trajectories.
- Apply and adapt the Creative Model in diverse international contexts with differing governance frameworks, cultural norms, and tourism pressures to test its universality and refine context-specific recommendations.
- Examine the role of emerging digital technologies in enhancing participation, storytelling, and visitor engagement, while addressing digital divides and ensuring inclusive access for local stakeholders.
- Analyze the effectiveness of different governance structures and regulatory policies in supporting creative tourism, particularly in balancing stakeholder interests and mitigating potential risks such as cultural commodification or overtourism rebound.
- Deepen understanding of visitor motivations, learning processes, and emotional connections within creative tourism to optimize experience design and enhance loyalty.

Funding

This work was supported by CONAHCYT, México, awarded to the author for pursuing the MSc. in Economic and Social Science at the Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa during the period from September 1, 2019, to August 31, 2021 [scholarship CVU: 1014734].

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available in Google Sheets at the following link: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1sLCpK2lZqL5V8IWKNgANR14sJANYxYii. These electronic files include the information analyzed and generated during the course of the study. Researchers are encouraged to review and reuse the data in accordance with applicable ethical standards and citation practices.

Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges to all the tourism makers who contributed their time, experiences, and knowledge during the ethnographic visits that form the foundation of this research. Special thanks to the Partnership of Hope, led by Dennis and Robin White, whose support made the field visit to Malawi, Africa possible. The author also acknowledges the guidance and contributions of the academic community involved throughout the research process.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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