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Róbert ŠTEFKO  
Richard FEDORKO  
Eva BENKOVÁ  
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# Cultural Tourism in the Perspective of Wellness: Towards a Model of Smart Wellness Destination Cultural Driven

**Tonino Pencarelli<sup>1,\*</sup> and Mauro Dini<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> University of Urbino “Carlo Bo”, Department of Economics, Society, Politics, Via Saffi 42, 61029, Urbino, Italy

<sup>2</sup> University of Urbino “Carlo Bo”, Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies, Via Saffi, 15, 61029, Urbino, Italy

## Abstract

**Research background** Cultural heritage plays a fundamental role in the creation of tourism value, contributing to the enhancement of the symbolic capital of places and to the differentiation of the value propositions of businesses and tourist destinations. In Italy, this function is amplified by the country's extraordinary historical and cultural wealth, vibrant human presence, and distinctive biodiversity. However, Italian cultural heritage today faces a paradox: while some destinations, such as major art cities, are affected by overtourism, many others—such as historic villages and inland areas—suffer from under tourism, risking abandonment and a loss of value.

**Purpose of the article:** Considering this imbalance, the paper proposes an interpretive model that distinguishes between different types of cultural destinations, highlighting their characteristics, challenges, and opportunities in relation to the growing wellness tourism market. It explores how cultural heritage—both tangible and intangible—can serve as a strategic asset to attract an increasingly international demand for authentic wellness experiences, by promoting the Italian lifestyle encapsulated in the slogan "Italian way of living."

**Methods:** This study adopts a conceptual research design based on a qualitative and interpretive approach, aimed at developing a theoretical framework that integrates culture and well-being into a new typology of tourism destinations. The goal is to explore the interconnections between cultural resources, experiential well-being, and sustainability.

**Findings & Value added:** The study provides a new interpretation of culturally driven tourist destinations, combining the ability of destinations to generate well-being for tourists by proposing personalized value offers in a slow manner or standardized offers that can be used quickly.

Moreover, the concept of smart wellness destinations cultural driven is introduced to generate value and well-being for both travellers and host communities, while respecting ecosystem limits and local specificities, and revitalizing areas currently excluded from major tourism flows.

**Keywords:** Tourist destination, Wellness destination, Cultural tourism, Smart tourism

**JEL classification:** L83

## 1. Introduction

In Italy, cultural tourism holds significant socio-economic potential thanks to the widespread presence of both tangible and intangible heritage assets. These resources—shaped by history, nature, and local communities—represent a distinctive national strength that supports the attractiveness and competitiveness of Italian destinations. The country's vast and capillary distribution of cultural sites qualifies it as an authentic “open-air museum” (Solima, 2020), with nearly one in three municipalities hosting at least one museum, and over 50% of municipalities in some regions.

Tourism, as a global phenomenon, has progressively evolved toward experiential models that emphasize not only the discovery of cultural heritage but also the pursuit of personal well-being. Within this framework, cultural tourism is undergoing a significant conceptual expansion, increasingly overlapping with wellness tourism. Italy—thanks to its rich landscapes, diverse cultural and culinary

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\* Corresponding author: [tonino.pencarelli@uniurb.it](mailto:tonino.pencarelli@uniurb.it)

traditions, and unique artistic and historical heritage—offers fertile ground for developing tourism models that integrate well-being as a key value proposition.

While early definitions of cultural tourism, such as the UNWTO's 1985 formulation, focused on narrowly defined motivations (e.g., study trips, festival participation, visits to monuments and museums), more recent perspectives embrace a broader and more inclusive view. According to the UNWTO (2019), cultural tourism encompasses “tourist activities whose essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience, and consume tangible and intangible cultural attractions and products in a destination.” These include not only traditional artistic and architectural assets but also lifestyles, values, traditions, and creative industries. In line with this holistic approach, Italian institutions (ISTAT, 2022b) now include natural and landscape heritage within the domain of cultural tourism, aligning with the spirit of the Faro Convention.

Statistical data confirms the territorial expansion of cultural tourism demand: many Italian municipalities that possess both cultural and scenic value have seen significant visitor growth. In regions such as Lazio, Umbria, and Campania, over 80% of tourist stays occur in culturally-oriented municipalities. Tuscany, Sicily, Emilia-Romagna, Marche, and Trentino-Alto Adige also exceed the national average (ISTAT, 2023).

Yet, this vast cultural capital remains underutilized. On one hand, it often fails to generate adequate economic and touristic value; on the other, its long-term sustainability is at risk. Tourism revenues could play a crucial role in ensuring the conservation and active use of heritage resources, preventing them from becoming static “cemeteries of cultural memory” with aesthetic but no experiential value.

This highlights the strong value-generating potential arising from the synergy between culture and tourism—what may be seen as a “marriage of interests”. Cultural and tourism sectors share complementarities in terms of policies, activities, and services. Cultural assets benefit from tourism infrastructures—transport, accommodation, hospitality, and services—which enhance visitor experiences and contribute to the usability and perceived value of heritage.

The integration of cultural elements in tourism offerings increases distinctiveness and market positioning, boosting destination competitiveness. Italy’s uniqueness lies not only in the beauty of its landscapes—common to many global destinations—but in the richness of its cultural, historical, and human biodiversity, which turns natural environments into anthropic landscapes. This uniqueness is central to the country’s branding as the “Bel Paese.”

This evolution calls for a shift in how cultural tourism is conceived: no longer as a form of passive consumption, but as a set of value-creating, well-being-enhancing, and socially responsible experiences. Culturally driven destinations, when designed with a focus on well-being, sustainability, and inclusiveness, can act as platforms for individual and collective regeneration. The real challenge is to balance heritage enhancement with the protection of natural and social capital, mitigating the risks of over-tourism and cultural homogenization that often affect iconic mass destinations.

Cultural heritage thus becomes a multistakeholder and multidimensional source of value: it generates economic benefits for tourism enterprises, social cohesion for local communities, and cognitive, emotional, and symbolic enrichment for citizens and visitors alike. It also supports the preservation of natural and cultural capital, including traditions, local identities, and the *genius loci*.

In this context, experience-based tourism—framed within the “experience economy” paradigm (Pine & Gilmore, 1998)—offers a powerful model. Tourists today seek transformative experiences that enhance personal well-being and foster self-improvement. Cultural tourism can meet this demand by offering meaningful engagement with places, narratives, and communities. These experiences, especially when bundled into coherent, integrated offerings, can differentiate destinations and promote their sustainable regeneration, especially in less-travelled areas such as inland villages and peripheral regions in Southern and Central Italy.

Achieving this vision requires a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach to destination planning—one that integrates urban policy, tourism marketing, and cultural resource management, and actively involves stakeholders at all levels. In doing so, cultural tourism becomes a transformative opportunity for the Italian tourism sector—capable of elevating quality of life, promoting sustainable development, and strengthening the socio-cultural fabric of local communities.

The challenge is to design cultural-driven wellness destinations— “smart” ecosystems (Dini & Pencarelli, 2020)—that combine digital innovation, community-based governance, and holistic value creation across economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

In this context, there is a lack of conceptual studies that explicitly frame tourism destinations through the lens of both cultural heritage and wellness, within a smart and sustainable development perspective. Existing literature tends to explore these elements in isolation or through fragmented disciplinary approaches. This article aims to bridge that gap by proposing an integrated conceptual framework for interpreting “culturally-driven smart wellness destinations.” Our objective is to develop a classification model that captures the diversity of such destinations, while highlighting the conditions under which cultural resources can generate value in line with the principles of well-being, sustainability, and digital innovation.

To this end, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How can cultural heritage—both tangible and intangible—be strategically integrated into wellness tourism offerings to generate multidimensional value for destinations and stakeholders?
2. What are the main types of culturally-driven wellness destinations, and how can they be classified according to the levels of personalization, well-being generation, and intensity of visitor flows?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Wellness Tourism: a holistic perspective

Academic research on wellness tourism has primarily analyzed the phenomenon from three complementary perspectives: tourist demand, destination development, and community well-being (Hartwell et al., 2018). From the community perspective, recent studies emphasize a paradigm shift toward recognizing the holistic benefits that tourism can provide to local populations. Sustainable and competitive destination management practices are increasingly being oriented toward the health and well-being of both tourists and residents, highlighting well-being as a strategic objective for tourism development.

From the demand side, scholars have explored the growing interest among tourists in wellness experiences that integrate multiple dimensions—physical, emotional, spiritual, and cultural (Kim et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2016; Damijanić & Šergo, 2013). Konu et al. (2010) proposed a segmentation of wellness tourists into six groups, based on combinations of motivations and activities related to sport, nature, spirituality, and culture. These include, among others, tech-savvy sport and nature enthusiasts, family-oriented health seekers, and culturally motivated autodidacts. Damijanić and Šergo (2013) highlighted the relevance of sociodemographic variables—such as income, gender, and education—in shaping wellness travel motivations, and noted the particular appeal of destinations rich in natural and cultural assets. Lim et al. (2016) identified the attractiveness of biodiversity and iconic attractions as key pull factors, especially for first-time and returning visitors.

Additional research has explored how wellness tourism offerings should respond to the expectations of new market segments. For example, Lee et al. (2019) suggest that hotels catering to millennials should offer services that enhance intellectual and spiritual well-being, such as reading spaces, educational workshops, natural medicine options, and holistic nutrition. These insights reinforce the growing consensus that wellness tourism must be understood from a holistic standpoint, encompassing physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, social, and environmental dimensions (Bushell & Sheldon, 2009).

This multidimensional view is echoed in various definitions of wellness tourism, ranging from those that emphasize harmony between body, mind, and spirit (Smith & Puczkó, 2014, p. 208), to others that focus more narrowly on health-related motivations (Heung & Kucukusta, 2013). More recently, scholars studying wellness destinations have moved beyond clinical and medical paradigms (Kamassi et al., 2020), increasingly embracing an integrative conception of well-being that includes cultural and social enrichment as core components of the tourist experience (Majeed & Kim, 2023; Dilette et al., 2020).

In line with this evolution, Dini and Pencarelli (2022) propose a broader understanding of wellness tourism that aligns with international contributions (Suban, 2023; Hwang & Lee, 2019; Sharma & Nayak, 2018; GWI, 2020). Their perspective integrates the diverse existential needs of travelers with an array of destination offerings designed to foster well-being. These include body care, gastronomy, nature immersion, cultural engagement, spiritual experiences, and entertainment—constituting a comprehensive “wellness value proposition.”

Wellness tourism, therefore, should be understood as a means of actively or passively supporting human well-being through tourism experiences that respond to the increasing demand for not only hedonic but also eudaimonic and transformative travel (Rahmani et al., 2018; Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023). Within this framework, culture emerges as a central and distinctive element—serving as a catalyst for deeper, more meaningful forms of tourism that are rooted in the local identity, values, and uniqueness of place.

## 2.2 Culture and wellness tourism: an integrated perspective

In the context of wellness-oriented destinations, culture should not be reduced to a static collection of tangible assets to be admired but rather understood as a dynamic cultural ecosystem that interacts with visitors (Ghermandi et al., 2020). Cultural heritage becomes a powerful medium through which tourists can connect with history, art, traditions, and the everyday life of local communities—thereby promoting a form of tourism that is more responsible, participatory, and transformative. Integrating culture into wellness tourism means going beyond monuments, museums, and archaeological sites, and embracing landscapes, festivals, gastronomy, and local craftsmanship. This allows visitors to develop a deeper and more authentic understanding of places—not only as natural legacies, but as expressions of human presence and collective identity.

This approach moves away from a narrow, elitist view of cultural tourism—traditionally reserved for highly educated segments—and promotes instead a more democratic and inclusive model, where active and conscious participation enhances curiosity, learning, intercultural exchange, and genuine contact with host communities.

Several studies have investigated the cultural dimensions of wellness in tourism. Feng et al. (2021) and Huang & Xu (2014), for instance, explore the role of traditional Chinese medicine in enhancing tourist well-being. Esfehiani and Albrecht (2019) and Maharjan et al. (2022) focus on intangible cultural heritage and its capacity to transform places into meaningful tourism destinations. Their work highlights the interdependence between material and immaterial elements in shaping culturally embedded well-being experiences.

Adopting a broad definition of cultural tourism enables the inclusion of multiple wellness-related travel forms, such as spiritual tourism (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019; Ashton, 2018), inspired by Feng Shui, yoga, or New Age movements (Drury, 2004); nature-based tourism centered on wilderness, forests, mountains, lakes or geothermal springs; as well as wellness tourism linked to local festivals and events (Malyshev et al., 2016), and food and beverage tourism (Forlani et al., 2022; Dilette et al., 2020).

Although the literature reflects the growing diversity of wellness tourism forms, much of it remains analytically fragmented—often failing to recognize the complex interdependencies among cultural, natural, and social elements. However, recent studies by Tülek (2023) and Smith & Ram (2017) address this gap by advancing the concept of cultural ecosystem services (CES): non-material benefits—such as well-being—derived from cultural, spiritual, recreational, and aesthetic experiences associated with ecosystems.

The CES framework represents a conceptual innovation in tourism and heritage studies. It replaces isolated analyses of cultural assets with a systemic approach that recognizes the interconnections among spiritual practices, culinary traditions, artistic expressions, and other cultural dimensions. This allows for a more holistic understanding of how tourism—especially cultural tourism—affects both the environment and society (Bachi et al., 2020).

The CES approach fills a critical gap in the academic literature by moving beyond disciplinary silos and illuminating how cultural expressions collectively contribute to tourists' well-being and the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations. Within tourism contexts, CES provide the interface through which visitors experience and value both natural and cultural environments. A scenic landscape, for example, offers aesthetic pleasure that attracts tourists, while historic sites offer a deeper sense of place and identity—ultimately enhancing personal enrichment and well-being (Bachi et al., 2020).

In this light, the CES perspective is particularly relevant for sustainable tourism management, as it emphasizes the importance of preserving and enhancing the availability and quality of cultural ecosystem services—not only for future tourism development, but also for the well-being of both visitors and local communities.

## 3. Methods

This study adopts a conceptual research design based on a qualitative and interpretive approach, aimed at developing a theoretical framework that integrates culture and well-being into a new typology of tourism destinations. The goal is to explore the interconnections between cultural resources, experiential well-being, and sustainability.

The methodological process followed three main phases. First, a review of scientific literature was conducted through targeted searches on international academic databases (including Scopus), using keyword combinations such as “*wellness tourism*”, “*cultural tourism*”, “*cultural ecosystem services*”,

“*destination well-being*”, and “*smart tourism destinations*”. The focus was placed on conceptual papers, theoretical reviews, and recent studies that address the integration of culture, well-being, and tourism.

Second, a critical reading of over 40 selected abstracts and articles was undertaken. The selection included studies that, although from different perspectives, addressed the transformative role of culture in tourism, with particular attention to the creation of experiential value and territorial regeneration.

Third, the literature was analyzed using a methodological approach inspired by the principles of *Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) and *theory building from literature* (Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017; Jaakkola, 2020). According to these approaches, theoretical categories are not predetermined but emerge progressively through an iterative process of comparison between concepts, sources, and analytical reflections. In this sense, the conceptual model proposed is the result of an exploratory and reflective process of theoretical synthesis and conceptual classification.

This approach fits within the tradition of conceptual research aimed at constructing new theoretical frameworks by means of interpretive literature synthesis, in the absence of primary empirical data but with the objective of addressing gaps in interpretation and systematization. Following this process, the paper proposes a model of culturally-driven smart wellness destinations that respond to the growing demand for enriching, sustainable, and culturally grounded tourism experiences.

#### **4. A new conceptual perspective for designing culturally-driven tourism destinations**

In outlining a conceptual model for cultural wellness tourism, it becomes essential to adopt a broad and integrated approach that considers the well-being of all stakeholders involved—tourists, local communities, tourism enterprises, and workers. This foundation enables the design of tourism experiences that are not only culturally enriching and wellness-oriented, but also socially responsible and both ecologically and economically sustainable (Dini & Pencarelli, 2020).

In this context—and following the framework of Cultural Ecosystem Services (CES) (Bachi et al., 2020)—cultural destinations can be envisioned as regenerative platforms that enhance the well-being of both visitors and host communities, in contrast to the often-degenerative dynamics of mass tourism. The design of such destinations must also integrate the principles of smart tourism (Pencarelli, 2020; Della Corte, 2017; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013) with the holistic perspective of well-being (Dini & Pencarelli, 2022; Dilette et al., 2020). This integration ensures that tourism offerings not only protect but also enhance cultural and natural heritage—leveraging new technologies to promote the socio-economic development of local communities (Solima, 2020, p. 177).

At the core of this approach lies the need to balance heritage enhancement and accessibility with the imperative of environmental protection and social regeneration, avoiding the risks of overcrowding, cultural homogenization, and negative ecological impacts typically associated with mass tourism in major urban destinations.

This contribution proposes a descriptive and interpretative model of tourism destinations (see Figure 1), built around two key variables that help distinguish four types of cultural tourism experiences:

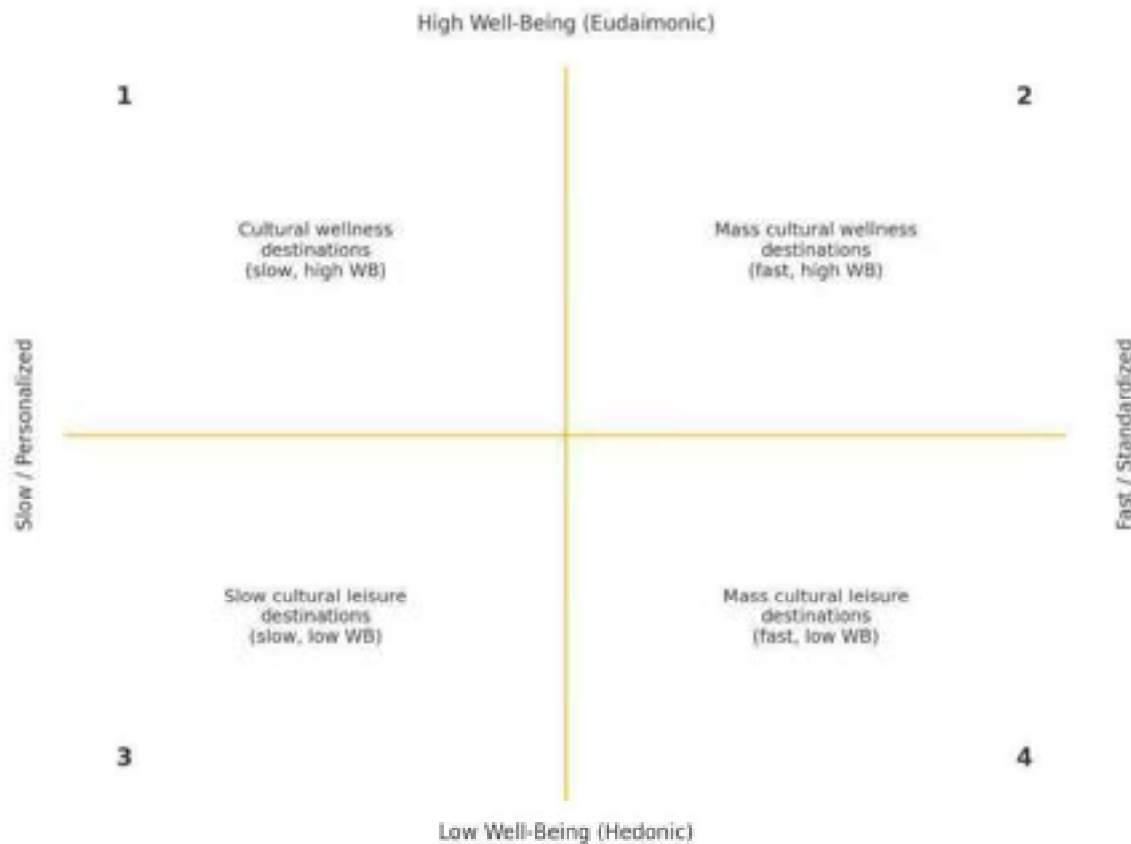
- Whether the destination offers slow and personalized experiences for small groups, or fast and standardized ones for large numbers (mass tourism);
- Whether the experiences generate low or high levels of well-being, considering both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions.

Hedonic well-being refers to the pursuit of happiness through immediate sensory pleasure and comfort. In cultural tourism, this can include aesthetic appreciation of art, tasting of local foods, relaxing atmospheres, or the enjoyment derived from exploring cultural, environmental, or scenic sites.

Eudaimonic well-being, by contrast, is linked to personal growth, self-realization, and the pursuit of meaning and purpose in life. It is achieved through experiences that stimulate reflection, learning, and inner development—such as participating in cultural workshops, attending spiritual events, guided hikes to heritage sites, meeting local artisans, or engaging in community-based volunteer projects.

In short, hedonic experiences focus on immediate pleasure and relaxation in culturally rich settings—such as food and wine tastings, stays in historic houses or agritourism, or wellness therapies. Eudaimonic experiences, on the other hand, emphasize long-term fulfillment, identity building, and connection with local culture and communities—through craft workshops, educational farms, spiritual retreats, or meditation programs.

The typology illustrated in Figure 1 captures this conceptual model of culturally-driven wellness destinations, offering a framework for rethinking tourism experiences in light of their regenerative potential for people and places.



**Figure 1.** Typology of Culturally-Driven Wellness Destinations  
Source: author's elaboration (2025)

#### 4.1 Slow Cultural Tourism Destinations with high well-being (Quadrant I)

In the upper-left quadrant (I), we find destinations where slow cultural tourism blends harmoniously with a strong sense of visitor well-being, creating an atmosphere of serenity and personal enrichment. Experiences are carefully curated to enable deep immersion in the local culture, following a relaxed pace that allows tourists to truly connect with the environment and traditions. Far from the pressures of everyday life, these destinations offer space for reflection and rest, fostering authentic interaction with local culture and the host community.

These types of destinations are typically found in medium-sized historic and artistic cities, located in urban contexts that provide essential services, acceptable accessibility, and a well-organized tourism infrastructure.

Destination Characteristics:

- Destinations that emphasize quality over quantity, offering authentic and meaningful tourism experiences.
- Personalized itineraries that encourage a reflective and in-depth approach to local culture.
- Active engagement with the local community, fostering meaningful cultural exchange.
- A relaxed environment and ample time to enjoy each experience, reducing stress and promoting high levels of well-being.
- Absence of overcrowding, ensuring that services and experiences remain easily accessible.
- Sustainability principles are integrated into spatial planning, providing ideal conditions for implementing sustainable development initiatives.
- Existence of programs aligned with the socio-environmental sustainability paradigm, aimed at preserving cultural and natural heritage while creating value for both communities and visitors.
- Technology is used discreetly to enhance the cultural experience, without overwhelming it.

Implications for Policy Makers and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs):

For tourism professionals, promoting well-being in culturally-driven destinations requires a deep understanding of the territory's cultural and natural assets, along with careful experience design to ensure that offerings are not only authentic and enriching, but also aligned with principles of sustainability and social responsibility.

Close collaboration with local communities is essential to co-create experiences that generate mutual benefits for both visitors and residents, fostering tourism as a lever for development and positive transformation. The well-being achievable in culturally-driven destinations stems from a tourism approach that embraces travel as an opportunity for personal growth and deep connection—both with oneself and with the surrounding world—thus paving the way for a more conscious, sustainable, and human-centered tourism paradigm.

#### **4.2 Slow Cultural Tourism Destinations with low well-being (Quadrant II)**

This typology, positioned in Quadrant II, reflects a particular tension found in destinations where slow cultural tourism is present but fails to generate significant well-being for visitors. These are places where the authenticity of the cultural experience is partially overshadowed by contextual limitations that negatively affect the quality of the visitor experience.

Although such destinations aspire to offer rich and meaningful cultural immersion, often located in off-the-beaten-path settings like small villages, inner rural areas, craft workshops, or locally significant historical sites, they may lack adequate infrastructure and services—such as tourist information, hospitality, transport, or food services. These gaps can lead to disappointment and limit the potential for well-being, especially among tourists who rely more heavily on accessibility and support services (e.g., elderly visitors or those with disabilities).

Despite their potential for promoting cultural and environmental sustainability and rediscovering hidden heritage resources, these destinations risk falling short of becoming true tourism platforms unless they invest in service quality and systemic organization. A critical reflection is needed on how to better integrate cultural richness with visitor well-being, making slow tourism not only authentic, but also welcoming and satisfying.

Destination Characteristics:

- Destinations offering authentic cultural experiences, yet generating a limited perception of well-being due to insufficient services or accessibility challenges.
- Opportunities for direct engagement with residents through traditional events, festivals, or hands-on learning from artisans.
- A strong focus on depth of cultural experience, hindered by constraints that prevent full relaxation or immersion.
- Limited or problematic access to key services, often caused by geographic isolation or infrastructural gaps.
- Absence or fragmentation of a structured tourism system.
- Low tourist impact, which in turn results in minimal economic benefits and limited development opportunities for the destination.
- Minimal and unsystematic use of digital technologies to enhance the tourism offering.

Implications for Policy Makers and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs):

Policy makers and DMOs must develop targeted marketing strategies capable of attracting mindful and respectful cultural tourists, avoiding the risks associated with undertourism. It is essential to design policies that encourage responsible travel behaviors, promoting respectful and conscious use of local resources, as well as participation in activities that contribute to the conservation of cultural and natural heritage.

Moreover, because accessibility, infrastructure, and tourism services play a critical role in enhancing visitor experience, improving access to these destinations is key to making them available to a broader audience. However, this should be done carefully, without compromising the integrity of their cultural and natural landscapes. Investments should focus on sustainable infrastructure and services that are sensitive to the local context and capable of enhancing the visitor experience while protecting the destination's identity and environment.

### 4.3 Mass Cultural Tourism Destinations generating high well-being (Quadrant III)

Contrary to common narratives, Quadrant III highlights that mass cultural tourism can also be associated with high levels of tourist well-being. Characterized by a rich and diverse cultural offering, this type of destination successfully combines access to iconic sites and attractions with high-quality services and infrastructure that enhance comfort and satisfaction. Effective and strategic management of tourist flows allow visitors to enjoy cultural treasures without suffering the discomforts typically linked to overcrowded destinations. These environments, though vibrant and dynamic, remain enjoyable and rewarding thanks to efficient destination governance.

Such destinations manage to balance high tourist density with the preservation of experience quality, proving that mass tourism does not necessarily diminish visitor well-being. They are distinguished by a broad, accessible cultural offer capable of attracting diverse audiences and generating full satisfaction through an array of experiences: historical and artistic sites, museums, festivals, art exhibitions, local markets, and events that celebrate both tradition and innovation. Even when standardized, these experiences are delivered with a high degree of comfort and quality, especially appealing to tourists with strong cognitive and financial capital, who may view such experiences as opportunities to reinforce their cultural knowledge, social identity, and elite status. As such, these destinations may also provide symbolic and status-related benefits through a form of ostentatious cultural consumption.

The destinations classified in Quadrant III are often major art cities, renowned not only for their historic heritage but also for their extraordinary capacity to innovate and regenerate. In these contexts, mass cultural tourism should not be viewed solely in negative terms, but rather as a powerful opportunity to share and disseminate culture on a large scale.

#### Destination Characteristics:

- Destinations that provide mass cultural experiences capable of generating well-being thanks to optimized services, advanced digital technologies, well-developed infrastructure, and effective flow management.
- A rich and varied cultural offering, including world-class museums, art galleries, theaters, UNESCO sites, and historic centers that blend tradition with contemporary expressions.
- High global reputation, with strong promotion of immersive community experiences such as local festivals, traditional markets, street performances, and public celebrations that allow authentic contact with local culture.
- Technological innovation is leveraged to enhance the visitor experience: mobile apps with interactive guides, augmented reality for site visits, digital ticketing systems, sensors to monitor visitor density, and apps to distribute tourist traffic help reduce congestion and improve service delivery.
- Sustainability efforts include eco-friendly practices at cultural attractions, the use of renewable energy, promotion of green transportation, and support for responsible tourism initiatives that minimize environmental impact and support local economies.
- Protection and enhancement of cultural heritage are prioritized, with ongoing investments in conservation and education programs that raise awareness among both visitors and residents.
- Sustainability policies also address social inclusion, ensuring that tourism benefits are distributed equitably by supporting local enterprises, valuing indigenous cultures, and involving minority groups in tourism offerings.

#### Implications for Policy Makers and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs):

For policy makers and DMOs, the key challenge is to manage the balance between accessibility, experience quality, and sustainability through a highly strategic approach—positioned at the intersection of technological innovation, sustainability, and cultural authenticity.

From a technological perspective, the adoption of smart solutions is essential to improve visitor experience and efficiently manage tourist flows. Smart data systems can help monitor and redistribute visitor numbers, reducing pressure on high-demand sites and contributing to a more balanced spatial distribution of tourism. These technologies also provide valuable insights into visitor behavior, informing future destination development and marketing strategies.

From a sustainability standpoint, destination managers must promote responsible tourism practices—supporting eco-mobility, green accommodations, and low-impact experiences—while ensuring that tourism growth does not jeopardize cultural or environmental integrity. The social dimension of

sustainability calls for mechanisms that share economic benefits with local communities, supporting their long-term prosperity and cultural continuity.

Ultimately, the equilibrium between accessibility and conservation remains central. While it is important to open cultural heritage to a wide audience, it is equally crucial to safeguard its authenticity. Policies such as limiting visitor numbers, promoting alternative circuits, and investing in low-impact infrastructure are essential tools for ensuring sustainable and meaningful mass cultural tourism.

#### **4.4 Mass Cultural Tourism Destinations incompatible with visitor well-being (Quadrant IV)**

Quadrant IV captures the limitations of mass cultural tourism in its most critical form, where the emphasis on quantity over quality gives rise to long-term sustainability issues such as overtourism. These destinations are characterized by excessive tourist flows, which exceed their carrying capacity and lead to a series of negative consequences. The high density of visitors, coupled with inefficient services, creates a chaotic atmosphere in which poor management of cultural and infrastructural resources undermines the overall well-being of tourists.

Consequences include the degradation of cultural heritage, erosion of local identity, increased housing and consumer prices that may exclude local residents, and environmental pressures related to overcrowding and resource overuse. From an environmental standpoint, these challenges often manifest in pollution, poor waste and water management, biodiversity loss, and degradation of cultural and natural sites—issues that require urgent intervention.

The experience in these destinations is often superficial and hurried. Local traditions and cultural diversity are flattened to meet the expectations of a global mass audience, resulting in a homogenization of tourism products. From an economic perspective, while mass tourism may generate substantial revenue, questions arise regarding the equitable distribution of its benefits. Overreliance on tourism may also render local economies vulnerable to market fluctuations, while the rising cost of living can erode residents' purchasing power.

Destination Characteristics:

- Destinations where overcrowding, rushed experiences, and superficial cultural engagement dominate.
- Significant issues related to managing large tourist flows, leading to discomfort, stress, and low levels of perceived well-being.
- Cultural and natural heritage degradation due to excessive visitor numbers and overuse of resources.
- Erosion of the destination's image and competitive positioning.
- Loss of authenticity through the homogenization of tourism experiences that threaten cultural uniqueness and identity.
- Rising tensions between residents and tourists, with locals perceiving tourism as an invasive force that disrupts social and cultural cohesion.
- Unequal distribution of tourism's economic benefits, with many residents experiencing little or no tangible improvement in quality of life.
- Increased pollution, biodiversity loss, and environmental deterioration caused by unsustainable tourism pressure.

Implications for Policy Makers and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs):

Designing and managing destinations that suffer from poor cultural tourism experiences requires innovative and proactive strategies. These should include regulating tourist flows, investing in sustainable infrastructure, promoting alternative forms of tourism, and enhancing authentic experiences that encourage more even visitor distribution. Active participation of local communities in tourism planning and governance is essential to ensure that adopted strategies are inclusive and aligned with residents' values and aspirations.

In these destinations, the tourism sector faces major challenges and must strive to rebalance economic development with the preservation of cultural, social, and environmental values. Seeking responsible and sustainable solutions is imperative to ensure that tourism remains a positive force for both places and communities.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

To effectively integrate cultural tourism within wellness tourism, it is essential to consider the growing influence of digital technologies on both demand and supply in tourism and culture (Pencarelli et

al., 2020). In this concluding section, we propose a conceptual model of culturally-driven smart wellness destinations, inspired by smart destination and smart city frameworks. In today's digital society, where institutions, businesses, places, and people are increasingly connected, future tourism destinations must also evolve as smart systems (Pencarelli, 2020).

The smart wellness destination model seeks to balance resident and tourist needs through sustainability and inclusivity, optimizing resource use via digital technologies. Being "smart" goes beyond infrastructure; it means aligning technology with social and environmental sustainability and enhancing residents' quality of life. These destinations must create value for all stakeholders by safeguarding and promoting cultural heritage while generating shared economic, environmental, and social value.

The typical components of a smart destination (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013) adapted for wellness and culture include:

- Smart People: Attract and leverage qualified human capital for tourism and cultural innovation, capable of operating with available knowledge and digital resources in tourism and cultural sectors.
- Smart Environment: Use ICT for sustainable management and conservation of natural, historical, and cultural heritage, promoting ecosystem protection (Pencarelli et al., 2020).
- Smart Mobility: Promote inclusive and sustainable transportation solutions (e.g., car sharing, bike sharing), with special attention to elderly and differently-abled tourists to improve accessibility and well-being.
- Smart Economy: Foster a vibrant, innovation-driven local economy supported by digital infrastructure, enabling the enhancement and sustainable use of cultural assets.
- Smart Governance: Encourage participatory, transparent, and inclusive governance involving residents and tourists, fostering intercultural dialogue and social integration.
- Smart Living: Ensure high quality of life, social cohesion, and a rich cultural environment that supports creative and fulfilling leisure for both locals and visitors.

To be tourism-ready, these destinations must be attractive, accessible (physically, economically, and informationally), well-equipped with hospitality and cultural services, and integrated into tour operator packages. Their value propositions should be rooted in a holistic view of wellness, offering both tangible and intangible cultural experiences—visits to museums and heritage sites, gastronomy, spirituality, nature-based activities, and wellness services—that contribute to the overall life satisfaction of tourists.

Tourists should be empowered to co-create value through digital technologies, transitioning from passive consumers to active co-producers of cultural and wellness experiences. This aligns with the co-creation model adapted from Cimbaljevic (2019) by Dini and Pencarelli (2020), where the visitor is not just a recipient but a central actor in value generation.

The challenge for culturally-driven wellness destinations lies in leveraging the potential of cultural resources within digital ecosystems to fuel sustainable territorial development and long-term vitality. Achieving this goal requires coordinated actions between public and private stakeholders, as well as multi-level institutional collaboration—particularly between ministries of culture and tourism, whose cooperation is essential for advancing cultural tourism.

Finally, in line with the principles of sustainability, especially social sustainability, the use of digital technologies must respect fundamental human rights. This includes safeguarding individual privacy, avoiding misuse of images and personal data, and preventing discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. These issues, now central to the public debate and ethical discourse surrounding artificial intelligence and digital transformation, must be actively addressed in the design of culturally-driven smart wellness destinations.

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