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Editorial: The ecosystem of hospitality – not without culture and creativity!

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Editorial on the Special Issue

The ecosystem of hospitality – not without culture and creativity!

In a time of increasing global challenges and crises, multiple parallel developments and trends, and social systems gaining complexity, traditional spatial management approaches such as destination management or location management are proving to be limited and ineffective to face the numerous negative side effects. Focusing solely on tourist destinations, economic zones, or local living spaces has led to significant issues, including overtourism, non-sustainable developments, unequal power distributions, negligence of stakeholder interests, or local protest movements (Dodds and Butler, 2019). Additionally, global megatrends such as digitalization, globalization, urbanization, demographic change, or climate change on the one hand, and changing behaviors on the demand side concerning sustainability, authenticity, or individuality, among others, are forcing cities and regions to recalibrate their strategies and approaches (Philipp and Pechlaner, 2023). Considerations of space have become more and more relevant in the development of cultural and creative initiatives (CCI), as cultural and creative organizations are exploring new approaches that emphasize the participation of different audiences and valorize the territorial dimension (Biondi et al., 2020; Demartini et al., 2021). Hence, a more integrated, holistic framework is required to address these challenges effectively.

To achieve a broader context of community or regional development goals and foster these holistic, integrated approaches, the network approach may help. Networks are perceived as a set of actors and their relationships to each other (Schubbert, 2021); as they are not restricted to organizational, societal, or geographic boundaries (Pforr et al., 2014; Kofler et al., 2018), they are more flexible and adaptable and, thus, meet the requirements for global competition and challenges. One example within the network approach are ecosystems: derived from biological ecosystems, the term refers to all actors, elements, relationships, and interactions in a specific geographical setting and facilitates a connection of the various spatial, social, and economic networks. The *Ecosystem of*

Hospitality is a recent proposition in this direction, allowing for a rethink of traditional tourism and destination structures and an integration of various stakeholders in spatial development processes (Pechlaner et al., 2022; Philipp et al., 2022). It focuses on “the individual and the opportunity for encounters between individuals [as well as] on issues surrounding quality of life, resilience, culture, mobility and connectivity” (Pechlaner, 2022, p. 12), which ultimately may facilitate building a sustainable tourism culture.

As the various target groups and stakeholders, including locals and visitors, are the core of the Ecosystem of Hospitality, local and regional culture and creativity are of particular importance. Culture and creativity are one aspect among others that constitute identity, which strengthens the coordination of actors and stakeholders as it creates a sense of place and, therefore, a sense of specific actions (Borin and Juno Delgado, 2018). Within CCIs, cultural heritage holds an intrinsic value and promotes meaningful cultural experiences that enhance the authentic understanding of the local identity and could strengthen social cohesion among different audiences (Baioni et al., 2021a).

The culture of hospitality promotes appreciation of personal encounters and considers them as vital for the quality of place and space development (Pechlaner, 2022). Culture fosters human encounters, authenticity, quality of life, and the wholeness of tourism (Steiner, 2022), and, therefore, is a core element of integrated approaches. If embedded in the Ecosystem of Hospitality, cultural and creative experiences better express the authentic intrinsic value of the cultural object and foster transformative processes of individuals participating in the experience. These processes, through the opportunities for reflection they offer, foster a shift in the perception of a sustainable tourism culture and can thus be understood as transformative processes. Digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities to enlarge such processes (Baioni et al., 2021b). In other words: integrated approaches cannot work without putting emphasis on culture and creativity and their transformative potential (cf. Borin and Donato, 2022)! The Special Issue entitled “*The Ecosystem of Hospitality – Not without Culture and Creativity!*” aims at deepening our understanding of this relationship and the importance of culture in terms of spatial development, tourism management, cultural and creative management, and hospitality. The five papers in this Special Issue cover a variety of topics, ranging from innovation and technology, to the SDGs, and even to the creation of conflicts.

Against the background of growing visitor numbers in forests, Bachinger et al. have analyzed the rising conflicts as they are becoming a challenge for both forest managers as well as tourism product developers. Focusing on the city of Freiburg in south-west Germany, they investigate the intensity, emotions, and solution-orientation in conflict-led discussions. Understanding the generation of these conflicts helps

understanding cultural influences of a surrounding system. Beyond such conflicts, positive outcomes can be created through collective action as shown by Shakya and Vagnarelli. In their case studies in Bad Hindelang, Germany, and Le Marche, Italy, participatory and collective approaches have enabled not only the preservation and conservation of local intangible heritage, but also its promotion for tourism activities and, therefore, its contribution to a sustainable rural development that both visitors and locals benefit from. Such approaches can, ultimately, contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. In their case study of a regional tourism project, Ottaviani et al. investigate the role of cultural tourism for a development of sustainable tourism. Local participatory approaches may, therefore, not only safeguard local heritage, but also foster sustainable development and even contribute to economic growth.

The two remaining articles in this Special Issue demonstrate that even in cultural and creative settings, technology is becoming increasingly important. Recently, this importance has been underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic, as stated by Marchegiani et al. In the context of much-needed strategic changes in the hospitality ecosystem, how digital tools are perceived and how they can enrich cultural experiences, which in turn strengthen sustainable tourism, identity, and community bonds. Finally, Marasco et al. deepen our understanding of the interplay of cultural and creative industries, the innovation-driven socio-economic transformation, and regional policies in the context of smart specialization. They underline the growing importance of this interplay for an innovation-led regional development of territories in the upcoming years.

In sum, the Special Issue entitled “*The Ecosystem of Hospitality – Not without Culture and Creativity!*” delves into the intricate relationship between hospitality ecosystems, culture, and creativity. The five contributions address innovation, technology, sustainability goals, and conflict management, offering a multifaceted exploration of the topic.

While this Special Issue offers significant insights into the interplay between hospitality ecosystems, culture, and creativity, several avenues for future research remain open:

Digital Transformation and Smart Tourism: Future research should explore the role of emerging technologies—such as artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and virtual reality (VR)—in enriching cultural tourism experiences. Investigating how these tools can facilitate *hybrid cultural encounters* while promoting sustainability is essential. For instance, studies could examine how smart ecosystems enhance visitor engagement while respecting local cultural heritage and ecosystems.

Resilience in Hospitality Ecosystems: Building resilience in hospitality ecosystems in the face of crises (e.g., pandemics, climate shocks) warrants further exploration. Research could address how cultural and creative assets act as drivers of

adaptability and recovery, focusing on cross-sector collaboration, governance, and participatory approaches.

Cultural Identity and Social Cohesion: Future studies might analyze the role of culture and creativity in fostering social cohesion among diverse stakeholder groups. Comparative case studies across different geographic regions can shed light on the extent to which cultural identity strengthens stakeholder relationships and promotes shared ownership of development goals.

Sustainability and the SDGs: There is a need to deepen our understanding of how hospitality ecosystems align with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Research could explore the ways participatory cultural approaches contribute to SDG targets—particularly Goals 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Innovative Governance Models: Research could focus on governance structures that facilitate integrated management of cultural, creative, and hospitality ecosystems. Future studies should evaluate the effectiveness of *network-based governance* in balancing the interests of diverse actors (e.g., tourists, locals, policymakers, and businesses).

The Transformative Potential of Hospitality Ecosystems: Further work is needed to conceptualize and measure the transformative processes resulting from cultural and creative experiences. Researchers could develop frameworks to assess the extent to which these experiences foster shifts in

perception, behavior, and identity—critical components of sustainable tourism cultures.

Impact Assessment and Measurement Tools: Finally, there is an urgent need for robust impact assessment tools to evaluate cultural and creative initiatives. Future research could focus on holistic models that capture economic, social, environmental, and cultural outcomes simultaneously.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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