



The role of creative tourism in enhancing urban sustainability indicators (Case study: Ahvaz city)

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Background and Objective: In today's world, for the realization of sustainable urban development, creative tourism is considered as a key variable that plays an important role in improving urban sustainability indicators. The present study, focusing on the city of Ahvaz, examines the necessity of how creative tourism can play a role as a powerful tool in improving urban sustainability indicators. By identifying the cultural and artistic potential of the city, it seeks to provide practical solutions to solve environmental, social and economic challenges, and in this way, it draws a path to achieving a sustainable and dynamic city.

Materials and Methods: The statistical population was 1,184,788 citizens of Ahvaz, of whom 384 were selected as a statistical sample using the Cochran formula and studied. Data analysis was performed through correlation analysis and structural equation modeling using SPSS and Smart PLS software.

Findings and Results: The results showed that the research measurement tool has high validity and reliability. The average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs are above 0.5 and the composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha values are also above 0.7, indicating the convergent validity and sufficient internal consistency of the instrument. In confirmatory factor analysis, the factor loadings showed that each sub-index is a strong and valid indicator for its respective construct, as almost all factor loadings were above 0.7. The highest factor loading was related to the "Creativity" sub-index (0.914) and the lowest was related to "Green Space" (0.631). These results confirm that the measurement model has high accuracy and validity.

Keywords: Sustainable city, tourism, creative tourism, PLS structural modeling, Ahvaz city.

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Extended abstract

Introduction:

Tourism stands as one of the world's largest and fastest-growing industries, playing an unparalleled role in the international economy. Employing over 200 million people and generating an annual turnover of up to \$6 trillion, it has become an "invisible export" that not only accelerates the economic growth of nations but also fosters the cultural, social, and economic prosperity of local communities. However, traditional tourism has gradually given way to newer approaches like creative tourism, which has been expanding rapidly since the 1990s, growing at twice the rate of the overall industry. This form of tourism focuses on experience, interaction, and active participation with the destination, thereby enriching urban life by strengthening cultural and economic infrastructure and embracing the contributions of creative and innovative individuals. Beyond a mere leisure activity, creative tourism serves as a powerful tool for achieving sustainable urban development. Instead of attracting large crowds, this approach emphasizes the quality of experience and deep engagement with the local community. By encouraging visitors to participate in cultural and artistic activities and local workshops, it helps preserve intangible heritage and strengthens urban identity. Economically, creative tourism supports small businesses and local artists, ensuring a more equitable distribution of income and making the urban economy more resilient. It also reduces pressure on infrastructure and natural resources, thereby improving environmental sustainability. This approach allows tourists to experience the local way of life as a temporary resident, contributing to their personal and spiritual growth. Despite the immense potential of creative tourism, the city of Ahvaz, with its rich historical and cultural heritage, faces significant challenges such as pollution, social issues, and unbalanced urban development. This is due to a lack of a comprehensive and integrated planning model. Traditional development approaches have failed to provide effective solutions to these problems, highlighting the need for a new, creative strategy. This study aims to offer a theoretical and practical framework that uses creative tourism as an innovative driver to provide urban planners in Ahvaz with a comprehensive roadmap. The ultimate goal is to activate hidden potentials, reduce dependence on the oil-based economy, create new job opportunities, and transform Ahvaz into a creative and sustainable city.

Methodology:

This study is a quantitative and applied research project aimed at providing a model for sustainable urban development through creative tourism in Ahvaz. To achieve this, a descriptive-correlational method and Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) were employed. Data were collected from 386 Ahvaz residents and tourists using random sampling and a validated questionnaire, which was confirmed for both validity and reliability. Finally, using SPSS and SmartPLS software, the data were first analyzed descriptively, and then the relationships between the variables were examined to elucidate the research model.

Results and Discussion:

The present study utilized Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the validity of the measurement model and the relationships between variables. The results from the measurement model evaluation indicate that the questionnaire possesses high validity and reliability. The values for Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha were all above 0.7, while the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were above 0.5 for most constructs, confirming convergent validity and the reliability of the measurement instrument. Furthermore, all indicator loadings were

very high, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.6, which suggests a strong correlation between the items and their respective latent constructs. However, the findings regarding discriminant validity present a notable contradiction. On one hand, the Fornell-Larcker criterion confirmed discriminant validity, with the square root of AVE values surpassing the inter-construct correlations, thereby indicating a conceptual distinction among the constructs. On the other hand, the HTMT method rejected discriminant validity for several pairs of constructs (e.g., sustainable urban development and physical), as their correlation values were unacceptably high. This discrepancy suggests that while the constructs are statistically distinct, they may be measuring similar concepts in practice due to their strong inter-correlations. Additionally, the model fit indices (SRMR and d_{ULS}) were above the desired thresholds, indicating a poor fit between the model and the collected data. Finally, the results of the structural model analysis and the one-sample t-test show that all relationships between the variables are statistically significant. With the exception of "tourism experience," all indicators had a positive and significant effect on "creative tourism." Notably, the relationship between "tourism experience" and "creative tourism" was negative and inverse, which, despite being unexpected, was statistically significant. Overall, these findings highlight the prominent role of all indicators in explaining creative tourism and its central impact on sustainable urban development, despite the persistent challenges related to model fit and discriminant validity.

Conclusion:

The study's findings indicate that creative tourism plays a key, positive role in enhancing urban sustainability indicators. By strengthening dimensions such as social capital, quality of life, tourism talent, and physical infrastructure, this approach contributes to balanced and sustainable urban development. However, despite confirming the validity and reliability of the measurement tools, some strong correlations between constructs suggest that their conceptual boundaries may require further investigation. Overall, the findings underscore the strategic importance of creative tourism as an effective leverage for sustainable urban development.

Declarations

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Authors' Contribution

Authors contributed equally to the conceptualization and writing of the article. All of the authors approved the content of the manuscript and agreed on all aspects of the work declaration of competing interest none.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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