

DEVELOPMENT PRESSURES AND SUSTAINABILITY: A LOCAL COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE-EVIDENCE FROM KOTOR

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Abstract: The development of tourism in modern conditions, especially in destinations of exceptional cultural and historical value, is increasingly accompanied by a series of challenges arising from the growth in the number of visitors and their concentration in limited space and time. In addition to infrastructural pressures, an increasingly pronounced challenge is the preservation of resources and the spatial-cultural values of the destination. Cultural heritage cannot be viewed only through material resources, but also through intangible dimensions that shape the sense of belonging and social relations. Cultural identity and authenticity do not represent static categories, but are shaped through everyday practices and the experience of space, which is why intensive tourist flows can lead to their redefinition, but also their degradation. These processes are particularly evident in Kotor, a city under UNESCO protection, where the concentration of tourist flows in a spatially limited historical core generates pressures reflected in the cultural structure and the everyday functioning of the city. Within this context, the perception of the local population represents an important framework for understanding the actual effects of tourism development. This paper examines the perception of the local community regarding the impact of tourism development on cultural identity, authenticity, and the atmosphere of space, as well as on the use of cultural heritage. The research was conducted on a sample of 321 respondents using a structured questionnaire, while the data analysis was carried out using the chi-square test of independence. The results indicate that a higher intensity of tourism development is associated with a more pronounced perception of a threat to cultural identity, degradation of authenticity, and changes in the cultural atmosphere of the city. At the same time, the majority of respondents recognize the commercialization of cultural heritage as a pronounced process, indicating a shift in its function and meaning in contemporary tourism flows. Although certain dimensions (communal order and concern for the preservation of UNESCO status) are not statistically related to the intensity of tourism, they are recognized as problematic, pointing to broader and more complex patterns of perception within the local community. In addition, there is a perception that tourism pressures alter the function of cultural heritage and create a sense of insecurity regarding the future preservation of the city's values. Overall, the findings indicate the need for balanced and strategically oriented management of tourism development. Such an approach implies the improvement of management mechanisms and the active involvement of the local community in decision-making processes. In this regard, tourism policies should be directed towards preserving cultural values, authenticity, and the long-term sustainability of the destination.

Keywords: *tourism development, cultural heritage, local community, sustainability, identity, Kotor.*

Field: Social Sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of tourism in modern conditions, especially in destinations of exceptional cultural and historical value, is increasingly accompanied by a series of challenges arising from the growth in the number of visitors and their concentration in limited space and time. Despite the economic benefits, primarily reflected in income growth, employment, and the improvement of the local economy, such dynamics and increased tourism pressure impose additional demands on destination management. Pressures arising from intense tourism flows result in overcrowding, degradation of public spaces, and disruptions in the daily functioning of the city, which is why the quantitative growth of tourism is no longer a reliable indicator of positive development (UNWTO, 2018; Hospers, 2019). In addition to infrastructure overload as a dominant issue, particular emphasis is placed on resource conservation and the protection of the spatial and cultural values of the destination (Milano et al., 2019; UNWTO, 2018).

Kotor, one of the most attractive tourist destinations in Montenegro, is a representative example of a destination where these processes are particularly pronounced. As a city of exceptional cultural and historical value and with the status of a protected area, in recent years it has been facing an increasingly significant growth in tourism flows, as well as the pressures they generate. An excessive number of visitors within a temporally and spatially limited historical core leads to crowding, traffic congestion, degradation of communal order, and changes in everyday life practices. These challenges are further intensified by a pronounced imbalance between the relatively small number of residents, around 22,000 (MONSTAT, 2024), and the large number of daily visitors, around 8,000 - during peak season (Media

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biro, 2025), which significantly complicates development management and increases pressure on urban space, infrastructure, and cultural heritage (Bogdanović & Radović, 2025).

An additional dimension of the problem lies in the fact that Kotor is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, which implies recognition of its “Outstanding Universal Value”, as well as strict standards of protection and site management (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2021). In this regard, reports from 2025 indicate the necessity of improving management mechanisms and sustainable development, accompanied by a warning that, in the absence of an adequate response to existing challenges, the site could be placed on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger (Portal Analitika, 2025). Such circumstances emphasize the importance of examining development pressures not only through economic, but primarily through social and cultural aspects of destination management.

Cultural and historical assets not only attract visitors but also shape local identity and contribute to socio-economic development (Richards, 1996, 2011). Cultural identity is not a static category, but a dynamic process that is continuously redefined through the interaction of the local community with its environment. The preservation of cultural identity is not merely an act of remembering the past, but an active strategy that ensures that the city maintains its “spiritual” integrity in the face of the challenges of globalization and uncontrolled tourism commercialization (Jelinčić, 2006).

According to UNESCO guidelines, the authenticity of cultural heritage is viewed through several dimensions. In addition to material characteristics, they also include the setting, context, as well as non-material aspects such as the “spirit of the place” and the experience of the space (spirit and feeling), which indicates the complexity of the concept of authenticity itself. (UNESCO, Operational Guidelines, 2021).

The intensification of tourism flows and the accompanying pressures result in an increasingly pronounced commercialization of cultural and historical assets, as well as their adaptation to tourism demand (Moraru et al., 2021). This is significantly reflected in the lives of local residents, so that the consequences of these changes are not limited only to the physical environment and cultural assets, but are also manifested in everyday life (UNWTO, 2018). In such cases, tourism development goes beyond the purely economic dimension and becomes a complex social process. This process affects the perception of belonging, the use of public space, as well as the overall quality of life of residents. Contemporary literature increasingly points to the emergence of feelings of pressure and loss of control over their environment among the local population in destinations experiencing intensive tourism growth (Gössling et al., 2020; Díaz-Parra & Jover, 2021).

Recent research indicates that the perception of the local population plays a key role in understanding these processes, as residents are the ones who most directly experience the consequences of tourism development (Moraru et al., 2021). These studies also indicate the need for the active involvement of the local community in planning and management processes in order to ensure the long-term sustainability of the destination (Popescu, 2024; GSTC, 2021). In this sense, the attitudes of the local population become essential for understanding the actual effects of tourism development on cultural heritage, identity, and the function of space.

Although there is a significant amount of research that deals with the impact of tourism on destinations, there is a lack of empirical studies that focus on local community perceptions in the context of development pressures and sustainability, especially in smaller Mediterranean destinations with a strong cultural heritage. This perspective enables a deeper understanding of the relationship between tourism development and the preservation of the identity of place, as well as the identification of key challenges faced by the local population.

Based on the above, the aim of this paper is to examine the perception of the local community regarding the impact of tourism development pressures on destination sustainability, with a particular focus on changes in cultural identity, authenticity, and the cultural atmosphere, as well as on the use of cultural heritage in contemporary tourism flows. By analyzing the attitudes of residents of Kotor, the study seeks to identify patterns of perception and determine implications for improving tourism management in support of sustainable development. It also aims to assess the level of concern among the local population regarding the future and the preservation of the cultural identity of the destination.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is designed as a quantitative cross-sectional study, with the aim of examining the perceptions of the local population regarding development pressures and their implications for the sustainability of urban space.

The target population consisted of adult residents of Kotor municipality. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire, and the final sample included N = 321 respondents. The sample was formed based on key demographic variables (gender, age, level of education, and place of residence within the municipality), which enabled the inclusion of different segments of the local community.

The questionnaire was designed as a set of closed-ended questions, with respondents expressing their level of agreement with specific statements using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). The questions were aimed at assessing perceptions of the intensity of tourism development, as well as its implications for key dimensions of sustainability, including cultural identity, site authenticity, cultural atmosphere, the commercialization of cultural heritage, communal order, and concern for the preservation of UNESCO status.

For the purpose of examining the relationship between the perceived intensity of tourism development and the aforementioned aspects of sustainability, contingency table analysis and the chi-square (χ^2) test of independence were applied. This procedure was used to test the statistically significant association between the intensity of tourism pressure (as the independent variable) and the perception of key dimensions of sustainability (cultural identity, authenticity, cultural atmosphere, etc.) as dependent variables.

The analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel, applying the CHISQ.TEST function, whereby matrices of observed and expected frequencies were constructed for each combination of variables. The results were interpreted based on p-values, with the level of statistical significance set at 0.05. These procedures enabled the identification of statistically significant relationships between the observed variables.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the chi-square (χ^2) analysis indicate that the perception of the intensity of tourism development significantly shapes the attitudes of the local population toward key aspects of destination sustainability. The effects of tourism pressure are particularly reflected in the domains of cultural identity, authenticity, and cultural atmosphere, where statistically significant associations were identified. However, this relationship is not consistent across all observed dimensions. In the case of perceptions of communal order and concern for UNESCO status, no statistically significant association was confirmed. These findings suggest that certain aspects of perception are formed under the influence of a broader set of factors, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the effects of tourism pressure.

A statistically significant association between the perceived intensity of tourism and the perceived threat to cultural identity ($p = 0.035$) indicates that respondents who perceive higher tourism pressure more frequently express concern about the preservation of the city's identity. Notably, as many as 84.1% of respondents believe that cultural identity is threatened to some extent or to a great extent, suggesting that the perception of its endangerment is not marginal, but rather dominant among respondents. The results confirm that the local community recognizes changes that are not only related to physical space, but also to the way the community perceives and understands its own identity. This finding can be further interpreted in the context of cultural contact generated by tourism. As Jelinčić (2006) points out, the encounters between tourists and the local population often lead to changes in the identity of the community, whereby tourism development can act as a factor that disrupts existing cultural patterns and creates a sense of discomfort in the everyday life of the local population.

A particularly pronounced association was identified in the perception of the impact of tourism on the authenticity of cultural and historical sites ($p = 0.0004$), representing the most notable statistical finding in the study. This result confirms that the intensification of tourism development significantly shapes the perception of the degradation of the authenticity of space. Although authenticity is often linked to the material preservation of cultural assets, Wang (1999) distinguishes between objective and existential authenticity, whereby the latter implies the experience of authenticity in everyday life. The findings suggest that in Kotor not only the physical authenticity of space is affected, but also the way in which residents perceive its originality and distinctiveness. These changes are accompanied by increasingly pronounced feelings of alienation among the local population in their own city.

A significant association between the intensity of tourism and the perception of changes in the

cultural atmosphere ($p = 0.002$) further confirms that tourism development also affects the intangible dimensions of space, including the setting, social relations, and the everyday life of the community. Such findings go beyond a narrow understanding of tourism as an economic phenomenon and point to the transformation of the city as a social space, rather than merely a tourist destination. Furthermore, the findings show that the consequences of tourism pressure are directly reflected in the everyday functioning of the local community, as also confirmed by the research of Jelinčić (2006). Accordingly, intensive tourism flows may lead to disruptions in established patterns of life, generate discomfort, and alter the use of urban space, particularly in destinations with a high concentration of visitors.

Evidence related to the commercialization of cultural heritage further confirms the perception that cultural resources are increasingly used for tourism-related consumption, which may result in their functional and symbolic transformation. At the same time, 83.2% of respondents believe that cultural heritage has been commercialized to some extent or to a great extent, indicating the widespread nature of this perception among the local population. This interpretation is supported by a statistically significant result ($p = 0.019$), suggesting that respondents who perceive more intensive tourism development are more likely to recognize the use of cultural resources for commercial purposes. The findings point to a transformation in the function of cultural heritage—from a public and identity-based resource to a market-oriented value. In this sense, as Tileaga (2026) points out, cultural heritage is a limited resource whose excessive commercialization may lead to its physical and symbolic depletion. In the case of Kotor, such processes may contribute to the gradual shaping of the city as a tourism-oriented space devoid of authentic social life, thereby raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of its UNESCO World Heritage value. Consequently, traditions and customs are adapted to tourist expectations, which may result in their transformation or the loss of their original function (Jelinčić, 2006).

In contrast to the previous findings, no statistically significant association was found between the perception of tourism intensity and the perception of communal order ($p = 0.569$). However, this result does not diminish the importance of the issue in this area. On the contrary, the findings indicate that the perception of communal order among respondents is generally unfavorable, regardless of the perceived intensity of tourism pressure, suggesting that this is a systemic challenge. In other words, problems in the functioning of the urban system are recognized as widespread and are not exclusively related to the subjective perception of tourism intensity, but also to the broader managerial and infrastructural capacities of the destination.

A similar pattern was observed in the case of concern for UNESCO status. Although no statistically significant association was found with the perception of tourism intensity ($p = 0.137$), the results indicate a high level of concern among respondents, with as many as 202 out of a total of 321 respondents reporting being “quite” or “very concerned.” This finding clearly indicates that the issue of preserving World Heritage status represents an important dimension of the collective perception of the local community. The absence of a statistical association in this case suggests that concern is not formed solely on the basis of the personal perception of tourism pressure, but also under the influence of a broader institutional and social context, including public debates and international warnings.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the effects of tourism development in heritage destinations cannot be fully understood through isolated indicators, but require an integrated approach that includes the interaction of material, social, and perceptual dimensions of space. The absence of consistent relationships across all analyzed variables suggests that tourism-related changes are influenced by broader structural and management contexts, rather than being driven solely by the intensity of tourist flows.

In this regard, the results point to the need to shift the focus from purely economic and physical effects of tourism toward experiential and perception-based aspects of sustainability. By emphasizing the role of the local community, the sustainability of a destination cannot be understood only through the condition of cultural heritage, but also through the extent to which residents recognize and identify with the values of the space.

These findings have important implications for destination management. Instead of relying only on quantitative control measures, such as limiting the number of visitors, a more comprehensive approach is needed—one that includes social sustainability, strengthens institutional coordination, and ensures the active involvement of the local population in decision-making processes. Such an approach is particularly relevant for destinations with protected status, where the preservation of UNESCO World Heritage values depends not only on formal compliance with conservation standards, but also on the long-term alignment between tourism development and the lived experience of the local community.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the results indicate that intensive tourism development in destinations such as Kotor generates significant socio-cultural effects that go beyond economic benefits and substantially influence perceptions of identity, authenticity, and the overall character of place. A pronounced level of concern among residents, together with the perception of the growing commercialization of cultural heritage, indicates a transformation in the function and meaning of cultural resources under tourism pressure. At the same time, the absence of statistically significant associations in certain dimensions suggests the influence of a broader set of structural and governance-related factors in shaping the attitudes of the local community. Based on the above, these findings emphasize the need for a balanced and integrated approach to tourism management, aimed at preserving cultural sustainability, authenticity, and the functional integrity of space, with the active involvement of the local population in decision-making processes.

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