

## 4. CULTURAL TOURISM, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY, AND HERITAGE – PROMOTION, VALORISATION, USE/REUSE OF WORLD HERITAGE SITES

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### World Heritage Sites, Local Communities and Tourists

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#### *Abstract*

World Heritage Sites are justifiably considered as valuable cultural and economic resources of a place. Previous research was dedicated to identifying the impact of world heritage sites on local development, as well as their ability to interact with local communities and to attract tourists. The present analysis describes the social fabric around the World Heritage Sites, aiming to understand better how these sites connect with various actors for identifying lines of sustainable management for these heritage sites. The study pinpoints that social interactions are very important in this context and that there is a shift towards two-way relationships between heritage and local communities, public administration, resident businesses, and tourists as well. Heritage site management should consider increasingly more its social value, the local social fabric, communities' ideals, and subjective well-being, locals' and tourists' stories, the voices, characteristics, and interests of multiple stakeholders.

**Keywords:** World Heritage Sites Management, Heritage Social Value, Heritage Tourism, Place Branding.

#### **Introduction**

The importance of World Heritage Sites is not to be contested. The *Convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (UNESCO 1972) adopted by UNESCO in 1972 recognizes as main characteristics of the world heritage sites (WHS) their “outstanding universal value” from the point of view of history, ethnology, anthropology, arts, aesthetics, science, and nature. Taking this into account, Article 5 of the convention urges states “to adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programmes”. Therefore, the value and the reason for being of WHS are tightly related to local communities.

The existence of a WHS in a community increases the pressure on that community from at least a certain perspective – it makes the community responsible not only in relationship with itself but also with the national and glo-



bal societies. A WHS comes with great responsibility, but also with advantages. The existence of a WHS makes a community outstanding, not only from a cultural point of view but also from a business perspective, it gives the local communities a competitive advantage. To fully benefit from such status, the WHS has to be strategically managed and promoted by the community as well as by its various stakeholders.

The present paper maps the impact that a world heritage site has on a community by investigating two main aspects. On one hand, the social value of heritage could be placed at the core of local development. This study presents the impact that WHS status has on it, as well as on the local dynamics. On the other hand, heritage influences tourism (Jimura 2011) – which influences the local communities and development in several ways. This paper focuses on the support of WHS not only for tourism development and its impact on local communities but also for a consistent place brand.

### **The social value of heritage**

Cultural heritage is tightly related to a certain place, a specific cultural aspect, a particular community. It exists in connection to the historical, social, and cultural evolution of a place. Generally, it is considered a manifestation of the past. Nevertheless, it is an active ingredient of the present-day life of a community, it is directly influenced by this community and it could impact the development of this community in different ways. Probably the first consequence of the existence of a WHS that people are thinking of is the increased awareness of the place and the development of tourism. Besides this quite obvious evolution, we stress that also the prestige of the place and the local community increases. One would note an upgrade of the status. A WHS adds to the assets of a community, both social and cultural, it generates national and international prestige (Smith 2002). This influences the local planning processes, both at public, as well as at private levels.

Heritage sites are increasingly more connected to intangible heritage (Richards 2018). This association of tangible and intangible heritage enhances the value of heritage sites, as well as their appeal, making them increasingly more popular with tourists and scales up the multiplying effects.

The increased prestige and visitation put, on the other hand, stress both on cultural heritage and on local communities. Overcrowding might lead to negative effects, even if those directly benefiting from the tourism flows are positively evaluating the tourism encounters (Jimura 2011). Nevertheless, in some situation tourist overcrowding determined high commercialization and degradation of local culture, which was replaced by kitsch, fake products, and a staged culture personalized with regard to the needs, desires, and expectations

of tourists rather than having in mind the cultural DNA of the local community (Jimura 2011).

A positive outcome related to the inclusion of a site in the WHS list would be an increased awareness of the local community in connection to its own heritage and culture. In some cases, local communities understand neither the importance of their heritage nor the relevance of proper conservation and valorisation (Jimura 2011). In this context, the management of a WHS and other stakeholders should develop special educational programs to make locals aware of the importance not only of the heritage itself but also related to its proper conservation and authenticity.

Successful promotional programs within local communities would positively influence the cooperation of local stakeholders and would allow the empowerment of local communities. People with a strong attachment to a WHS would also feel responsible and be empowered in connection to it (Strzelecka, Boley and Woosnam 2017). Generally, the public support for a heritage site is, maybe paradoxically, directly linked to its state of preservation and perceived importance (Zbucea and Anghel 2016, 605-606).

Cultural heritage, in general, is associated with its social value. The social value of a WHS resides in several aspects (Dans and González 2019): prestige, aesthetics, economic impact, and legacy. The first aspect, the prestige of a WHS, is connected not only with its existence but also its recognition. The status of WHS upscales all the previously mentioned dimensions. Putting all these aspects together, we find the necessary conditions for sustainable development.

To ensure sustainable development of the heritage, an ecosystem approach is recommended (Grefe 2004). This has in mind both the heritage (and its management body) and its “clients”/ stakeholders. Since among the most important stakeholders for any WHS are the local communities, the management of a site should pay special attention to them and their well-being and openness towards the site.

The locals’ well-being is a subjective evaluation of “feeling well”, from both emotional and physical perspectives, being related to the perception of the overall quality of life (Western and Tomaszewski 2016). A positive sense of well-being makes the residents open towards the tourism associated with a WHS (Chi, Cai and Li 2017). Among the factors positively affecting the subjective well-being are the perception of the economic status of the residents, developed social relations, and overall social environment, as well as the sense of community. Therefore, social fabric and dynamic might directly influence the effectiveness of the management strategy for a WHS and the sustainable development of the place in connection with its cultural heritage.



### Heritage and tourism

Cultural tourism, in general, is developing around the world (Zbucnea 2012). Therefore, the existence of a world heritage site would be related not only to increased cultural tourism in an area but overall with developed tourism flows, since most tourists would positively evaluate the existence of cultural venues at the destination and they would also check the most relevant cultural attractions at the destination. The WHS status is also relevant for international tourism. A global investigation shows that a WHS status would generate an increase in tourism flows, nevertheless, the impact is nonlinear (Lin et al., 2020). Regarding this reaction, we pinpoint that the natural WHSs seem to attract more tourists than the newly accepted cultural WHSs (Su and Lin 2014). The inscription of new heritage sites in the case of countries with a small number of such sites is generating a more relevant impact on tourism flows compared to countries with a large number of sites already included in the list.

Heritage is increasingly more attractive to tourists, nevertheless not always the inclusion of a heritage site in the list brings, in the short and medium terms, additional visitors<sup>1</sup>. This apparently counterintuitive evolution might be explained by several factors. The site might be too remote and lack accessibility. The inclusion of the site in the WHS list might not be known and in general, the site is not promoted outside the local community/ region after the inclusion. The general and tourism infrastructures might be too poor to facilitate the presence of tourists.

In principle, the “universal value” would make a WHS attractive to everybody by default. Nevertheless, the first aspect to be considered when managing and promoting a WHS is its local specificity. In some situations, it could even enter into conflict with the values of certain segments of tourists, and even with parts of the local communities (Tucker and Carnegie 2014). Presenting the heritage both to locals and tourists should have in mind a dialogic approach, a multifaceted discourse. Alternative narratives are to be considered in all aspects related to managing WHSs. A dynamic approach is also a concern since the mentalities and exigencies both of locals and tourists are in a continuous change (Park and Santos 2017). Meaning-making is a negotiation process that involves many stakeholders. Heritage could be made relevant for tourists in this way not only from an external perspective but also from an inner one, having a personal insight relevant for various segments of tourists.

Tourists come to visit a heritage site for its social value. Nevertheless, the decision-making process and the behaviour at the location are influenced by

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<sup>1</sup> See an evaluation of the studies on this topic in Jimura, 2011.

many other factors, such as tourists' values and services provided (Santa-Cruz and López-Guzmán 2017). As specified before, the local communities also are a relevant stakeholder. Resident's attitude, involvement, and, ultimately, empowerment, are part of the puzzle of successful tourism management at a WHS. Besides the perceived well-being associated with tourism at a WHS (Chi, Cai, and Li 2017), knowledge, and opportunity (Rasoolimanesh et al. 2017) are factors influencing community participation.

The participation of resident businesses is also a relevant aspect of sustainable development and tourism at a WHS. Besides their direct economic gains related to tourism, some other general factors are determining their attitudes towards the WHS (Olya, Shahmirzdi and Alipour 2019). We mention the perceived high levels of cultural impact and quality of life, as well as low levels of environmental and social impact which are predictors of the support for sustainable tourism development. The businesses which have been operating for a longer time at the location, and observed that the economic, social, and cultural benefits generated by the WHS are low, are unlikely to support the tourism and management of the site. Generally, for all types of businesses, the positive economic impact of tourism associated with a WHS is not enough to generate the support of the local business.

Other relevant stakeholders have to be considered when designing the management strategies related to tourists, even if they are not directly connected to these visitors. For instance, scholars and archaeologists are not only providers of cultural content. They could also be mediators for the discussions and dialogues around the heritage, involving both local communities and tourists (Pacífico and Vogel 2012).

The creative experience associated with a WHS increases not only the level of the satisfaction of the tourists and other beneficiaries, but also the brand image (Huang and Liu 2018) — both considering the level of the heritage site, and the wider place level. The quality of learning processes increases the travel benefits and could lead to multiplying effects.

Increasingly more, the research draws the attention to changing patterns of place consumption, where both tourists and locals have a role (Rakić and Chambers 2012; Ponting and McDonald 2013; Thurnell-Read 2017; Cohen and Cohen 2019). There is a shift from passive exposure to material aspects and multisensory elements to active knowledge absorption and affective involvement. Within this new framework, local communities are not only visible but also are active agents for fulfilling place experience and sustainable place development.

Sustainability of the management of a WHS is also connected to sustainable tourism. An advantage associated with heritage sites is that their seasonality



is low (Aznar and Hoefnagels 2019). Therefore, they offer a valuable constant cultural tourism resource. The economic long-term value of heritage sites for local communities is not very straightforward. The increase of tourists' number might not generate consistent and increased revenues for local communities; over-tourism might generate some negative side-effects and burdens on local communities (Aznar and Hoefnagels 2019; Melubo and Lovelock 2019). Social and culture are other dimensions of sustainability, that influence in various ways cultural tourism. These dimensions contribute to attracting tourists sensitive to social and cultural value and heritage preservation. However, tourists are divided into several segments and only parts of them are oriented towards and active in the field of heritage preservation (Alazaizeh et al. 2016). In terms of behaviour, several dimensions of general, as well as site-specific approaches have been identified (Buonincontri, Marasco and Ramkissoon 2017). The first category includes several dimensions: civil actions, educational activities, financial actions, persuasive actions, and legal ones. The second category involved active contribution towards better preservation of the site and responsibility towards local heritage, culture, and communities. They could be relevant not only in terms of the historical and cultural dimension of heritage but also related to tourism development.

### **Heritage and place branding**

Place branding is tightly connected with being an attractive location. By such endeavours, a place raises its profile and reputation, by developing a place identity, focusing on local assets, values, and symbols<sup>2</sup>. Effective place branding is based on a kaleidoscopic approach, a symbiosis between functional and representational dimensions of the place (Giovanardi, Lucarelli and Pasquinelli 2013). Other fundamental elements of place branding that should be considered are rights, roles, relationships, and responsibilities (Aitken and Campelo 2011). Therefore, creating a place brand is a continuous process of negotiation and co-creation involving many stakeholders. The local administration has a leading role in planning a sound sustainable development, but successful place branding depends on negotiations and harmonizing the interests of all stakeholders (Porter 2020). Another aspect to consider is that the international brand associated with a WHS might not resonate with the local brand of the same WHS, therefore additional harmonization being necessary (Shabani, Tucker and Nazifi 2020).

All these processes are connected to the way culture is assimilated and valorised, to its reinforcement and incorporation in the place brand. Through par-

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<sup>2</sup> We recommend to start the documentation with the seminal works of Anholt 2005; Govers and Go 2009; 2016; Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013.

ticipation, mental associations between a place and local aspects such as material and immaterial features, institutions, and representations are developed as features of a place brand (Kavaratzis and Kalandides 2015). Within this framework, both material and immaterial cultural heritage becomes an important ingredient of the place branding process. Nevertheless, generally, places are complex entities and culture is only one ingredient in the branding process, which is associated with other aspects even in the case of significant cultural heritage (Zbucnea 2014). The argument is two-folded. On one hand, culture is not the only relevant feature of a place; it is only a part of the place identity. On the other hand, culture does not have (yet?) a strong universal power of attraction, while the interests and points of references of stakeholders are very diverse.

Place branding is dependent on place identity. As Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) point out, the identity is not a fixed, given item. It evolves in relation to the dialogue between various internal and external stakeholders. This identity is also shaped by the material and cultural assets of the place. Although heritage is a production of the past, its actual value is connected to its present valorisation. Only part of the heritage is selected to be part of the place identity. Considering its prominent position, as well as its political and cultural influence, a WHS site is inevitably an important component of the local identity. Nevertheless, its actual position depends on the relationships between various stakeholders.

The existence of a WHS ensures more visibility for a place, therefore contributes to a sharper and more convincing place identity. This process is supported by social cooperation among stakeholders and could ensure a more sustainable cultural development and general sustainable development. Arguments rely on several lines, such as increasingly more culture generates economic benefits to diverse segments of the public, culture is ever tighter related to local communities, while also being included in dialogue with other segments of the public (such as tourists, for instance, accountability has become a norm in heritage management, culture and heritage are an increasingly more present part of the modern society, heritage supports social reflection and dialogue (Zbucnea 2014). To actually have such processes, the management strategies of heritage should be aligned with place branding processes.

Sustainable development and planning of a place brand depend on the cooperation of various stakeholders. Nevertheless, the way they cooperate is a complex of approaches (Beritelli 2011). Personal factors are very relevant in this context. Therefore, the management of local development, as well as of the WHS should consider these aspects, design a proper PR strategy with a relevant human perspective to develop/activate local social networks. Consequently, both locals and tourists should not be ignored in setting sustainable



managerial strategies to stimulate responsible behaviour and active word-of-mouth advocacy. The tourist behaviour might be general, or more specific – involving them responsibly in site preservation and management-related processes (Buonincontri, Marasco and Ramkissoon 2017). This sustainable behaviour is connected to an existing social bond between heritage and tourists, but also with their connection with the place. Place identity, place attachment, and tourist experience are positively influencing the responsible and active behaviour of visitors.

Sustainable and credible place branding is also related to the attitude and involvement of local communities. Even if the existence of a WHS impacts them directly and indirectly, the locals are not always willing to be involved in management processes, in tourism activities, or other approaches connected to the heritage site. More active communities are the ones already attached to the place and adopting community ideals (trust inside the community, cohesiveness, etc.) rather than values related to the heritage itself (Dragouni and Fouseki 2018). To be noted that the expectations related to tourism development are not necessary a drive for community participation.

Heritage, including WHSs, contributes to this stakeholders' participation if it provides a sound narrative, relevant for the involved stakeholders. The discourse depends on material aspects, such as infrastructure and physical evidence, but also the constructed immaterial elements and its image. Its authenticity and power of connection contribute to offering a competitive advantage of the place brand that incorporates it (Rius Ulldemolins 2014). Over time, WHS became a brand in itself, and it endorses effectively the development of place brands where the included sites are located (Ryan and Silvanto 2009).

Local culture is part of a place branding effort, but its inclusion might be considered in several ways. One such approach would be to re-design the image by re-positioning based on cultural heritage (Fan 2014). In this case, heritage is used both in the process of image development, and its communication.

Another model of place branding is the development of cultural districts as centres of local identity and development (Evans 2015; Fanzini and Rotaru 2012; Le Blanc 2010; Nuccio and Ponzini 2017; Ponzini, Gugu and Oppio 2014; Zbucea 2014). In terms of spatial form, four models of cultural districts have been identified, among which heritage and cultural quarters, where heritage is at the centre of the processes and image development (Evans 2015). The existence of a WHS could support increased visibility of such districts, but it is neither a must nor a sufficient pre-requisite. It might also support the sustainability of such endeavours, which are sensitive structures, with relatively low rates of long-term consistent success (Nuccio and Ponzini 2017).

Similarly, the inclusion of a place in a cultural route might strengthen the place branding efforts (Puczko and Ratz 2007; Zbucnea 2014). The endorsement offered by such cultural routes is beneficial to the local communities and its WHSs, by offering several advantages, such as increased visibility, or larger tourist flows. Nevertheless, the focus does not rely on local place brands, rather on the thematic route though.

When considering the relationships between culture and its inclusion in place branding processes, aspects of authenticity have to be considered. Apparently, paradoxically, the two opposite approaches proved to be effective – the appeal to cultural authenticity, as well as the imposing of a brand to local stakeholders (Hornskov 2007). Therefore, a flexible and yet consistent discourse has to be adopted. The success of such endeavours might be connected with a cultural dynamism covering the proposed narratives. These processes are easier to design and implement in the case of the existence of a WHS, which already benefits from a strong capital of authenticity, generally accepted by local stakeholders.

### **Conclusions and implications**

To synthesize, WHSs are in tight relationships with local communities, public administration and place representatives, resident businesses, and other stakeholders, as well as tourists visiting them. Sometimes, we observe one-way relationships, while in other cases the links are double-ways. The presence of a WHS impacts local communities by contributing to their prestige, education, and economic development. In their turn, local communities are influencing WHSs in the context of responsible action towards them, positive community ideals, and subjective well-being. Two-ways relationships are manifest in the field of empowerment and participation. These aspects are two folded: knowledge-driven and opportunity-driven. Also, two-way connections are manifest in connection to the narratives of a WHS. The voices of local communities impact the discourse associated with a WHS, while the narratives of the place shape the local stories. These perspectives are mediated by scholars, archaeologists, architects, but also by public bodies.

Considering the above framework, one observes that social aspects are vital to be considered for proper management of a WHS. The social value of heritage, in addition to the local social networks and dynamics, contributes not only to the management of the site but ensures its contribution to the local sustainable development.

The influence of a WHS on local actors, such as public administration and businesses, is mainly considered on the economic dimension – presented as di-



rect and multiplier effects generated by the operation of the site. According to the observed long-term economic, social, and cultural impact of a WHS, the resident businesses have a positive and cooperative attitude towards the site. When considering local development planning, two-way relationships between the public administration and the management of a WHS should be considered for sustainable development.

As expected, WHSs attract tourists and they contribute to the education and personal development of their visitors. For their part, tourists also influence WHSs. The increased tourists' flows put important pressure on the site and its infrastructure. Also, tourists' attitudes and behaviours towards the site and heritage preservation have a strong impact on heritage. The WHS also influences tourists considering the experience associated with the visit at the site and in the surrounding area. Lately, there has been a shift towards a co-created experience and two-way relationships when considering site experience. Also, in a sustainable management approach, tourists have become co-authors and part of the heritage narratives; there is a "restitution" of heritage towards communities (Zbucea et al. 2016).

WHSs are also tightly related to the place and the landscape which houses them. Their features and socio-cultural value depend on these elements. The place should have a voice in the co-creation of a WHS narrative, while the site should co-contribute to the place brand development. A place brand is tightly related to place identity and awareness. Therefore, heritage is a part of this process, is an active actor in the negotiation processes and the creative endeavour associated with sustainable place brand development. A strong place brand contributes to the development of tourism and sustainable local development.

Another aspect investigated by the paper was the relationships between heritage and tourism. The actual impact of a WHS on tourism depends not only on the characteristics of the site, which are unique and valuable since the respective heritage is included in the WHS list. The influence depends on the scarcity of the WHSs in a region, on the public's awareness, the local infrastructure, the social cooperation among stakeholders, the local community involvement, as well as the existence of inclusive narratives.

We observe an increasingly more dynamic perspective on world heritage site management. The associated strategies should not be fixed in time. Sustainable management implies continuous negotiation and co-creation with external actors. The multi-stakeholder approach should be the norm. Sustainable site management finds the balance between local and universal values, between various types of stakeholders who appreciate the cultural and social impact associated with a WHS.

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## Situri ale patrimoniului mondial, comunități locale și turiști

### Rezumat

Siturile Patrimoniului Mondial sunt considerate în mod justificat drept resurse culturale și economice valoroase ale unui loc. Cercetările anterioare au fost dedicate identificării impactului siturilor de patrimoniu mondial asupra dezvoltării locale, precum și capacității lor de a interacționa cu comunitățile locale și de a atrage turiști. Prezenta analiză descrie țesătura socială din jurul siturilor Patrimoniului Mondial, urmărind să înțeleagă mai bine modul în care aceste site-uri se conectează cu diverși actori pentru identificarea liniilor de gestionare durabilă pentru aceste situri de patrimoniu. Studiul arată că interacțiunile sociale sunt foarte importante în acest context și că există o schimbare către relații bidirecționale între patrimoniu și comunitățile locale, administrația publică, întreprinderile rezidente și turiști. Managementul sitului patrimonial ar trebui să ia în considerare din ce în ce mai mult valoarea sa socială, țesutul social local, idealurile comunităților și bunăstarea subiectivă, poveștile localnicilor și turiștilor, vocile, caracteristicile și interesele mai multor părți interesate.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** gestionarea siturilor de patrimoniu mondial, valoarea socială a patrimoniului, turismul de patrimoniu, marcarea locului.

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