Heritage as an alternative driver for sustainable development and economic recovery in South East Europe

Changes in cultural heritage consumption model: Challenges and limits

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Abstract

Digital technology and social media become active tools not only for facilitating travel organization, but in the last decade was developed for supporting innovative forms of cultural consumption, especially participative one. The authors have developed a qualitative survey to identify the satisfaction of using cultural products based on ICT by a young consumer with expectations of innovative knowledge of the cultural heritage gained in-situ experience. The satisfaction survey aimed to identify the consumer’s reaction to a new form of heritage cultural products, based on ICT and that address to the audience a challenging interpretation of the heritage asset, more related to present significance and motivation for consumption. We were looking for the calibration of the offer model dedicated to young consumers and also for selection of the most suitable cultural products able to stimulate them for visit in situ. Because we addressed to the future consumers (more familiar with internet facilities for information and virtual visits to some cultural assets such as castles, churches, national parks, historical inns, etc.), we subsequently attempted to identify commonalities and main trends in terms of youth cultural consumption pattern.

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1. Introduction

Modern society and actual cultural consumption profile reveal two important aspects for future demand profile of the cultural heritage products and services. The first one refers to the young generation that asks for a different cultural consumption model – a knowledge based activity, participative in-situ (Papathanasiou-Zuhr, D., Weiss-

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Ibáñez, D., (2014), able to stimulate a modern approach of the heritage significance. Youth embrace and integrate the modern ICT devices in their day by day life, changing the cultural consumption model.

In this context, regarding cultural consumption, information and communication technologies products (devices, communication platforms etc.) are seen as a dual tool:

- Facilitating broad information, remotely, substituting some of the classic consumption (information aspects, study aspects, history aspects, etc.); facilitating access and cultural consumption through ICT products for categories of assets previously considered less accessible (e.g., the Internet allows a priori knowledge of basic information and give the consumer the opportunity to deepen their knowledge in-situ);
- Developing an attitude of environmental conservation to a greater extent than traditional cultural consumption (e.g., development of tourist routes in forests, in the natural environment, which can be facilitated by various ICT devices and allow a better protection of the sites, of the natural habitat, as it can prevent markings on trees or on rocks, etc.).

According to Addis (2005), “the use of new technologies that stimulate all the senses of the individual allows the re-creation of the content of the message, both in terms of education and entertainment.” Moreover, there is a general tendency for information and consumption focused on aspects of authenticity, customs, traditions, on complementary forms and cultural values to some very popular cultural and tourist assets. It stimulates also the valuing of the less known local heritage assets, revealing of the new aspects or perspectives of the place significance.

In this respect, the local economy in areas with heritage assets allows designing a strategic approach of a new model of socio-economic development from at least the following perspectives:

- Complementary services for the culture consumer based on length of stay, age profile, education level and consumption habits.
- Fostering the consumer for participation in cultural, traditional local events (dedicated days, fairs, regular events, local festivals) that are related to both main heritage assets from the area, and also to the other aspects of the cultural heritage from the area.
- It can create networking in real time with other assets included in innovative tourism trails – on-line events, group participation etc.
- Facilitate the opportunity to discover and to use for personal consumption handicrafts from the area.

The modern consumer accepts as a quality consumption those products, services and complementary activities that ensure, on one hand, the cognitive and spiritual satisfaction of information and, on the other hand, the specific convenience of the modern society and the availability of the access at different heritage assets. In present, “visitors are demanding more individual and authentic experiences and are relying more heavily on technology to plan and enhance their trips” (OECD, 2014). Digital technology and social media become active tools not only for facilitating travel organization, but also for supporting innovative forms of cultural consumption, especially participative one, as it was developed in the last decade (becomes a tool for consumption provider).

Starting from these aspects, the authors have developed a qualitative survey to identify the satisfaction of using cultural products based on ICT by a young consumer with expectations of innovative knowledge of the cultural heritage gained in-situ experience. In our paper we present the consumers’ opinion regarding such innovative approach of heritage interpretation, tools for heritage products’ dissemination and cultural assets promotion. It is based on renewed offer for integrated products and services - cultural heritage products as participative visitation of cultural assets etc. - associated with niche touristic services - extreme tourism, adventure travels in preserved natural heritage.

One of our aims was to define the openness of the consumers (on age groups and professional profile) to new types of products, considering the fact that today’s consumer values emotions, unique interpretation and participation. We expected to collect arguments to support the idea, if such a new consumption model becomes predominant.
2. Challenges and limits for providing new model of heritage consumption products

The cultural identity through innovative products represents the main stimulating factor for in-situ cultural consumption. Its motivate decision for visiting the places and for tourism services acquisition. The modern consumer is very pragmatic and evaluates through a cost-benefit analysis all the aspects supporting the travel decision. It consist of estimate at least the value added from the following aspects: a) knowledge acquisition; b) enrich experience and co-creation during in-situ visit; c) discover the present significance and potential impact on day by day activity – lessons, good practices etc.; d) networking for future heritage consumption. In order to develop a strategic approach in changing business model for cultural heritage consumption, first of all, it is necessary to define as accurate as possible the main tendencies from the demand side and the visitors profile and flows.

Our first assumption was based on two tendencies:

- Higher distribution of ITC devices among all population categories;
- Future consumption model is definitely designed by the youth, as promoters of changes.

Internet is the primary modern source of information as preliminary step in decision for in-situ cultural consumption. A lot of general information is provided through assets sites or information database from specialized institutions-cultural agencies, public agencies, virtual libraries, etc. The new type of consumer is selective regarding information, but excited about the innovative cultural heritage products. Those new cultural products able to provide additional specific details are appreciated as attractive. Those products have to offer a new interpretation of the current/modern significance of each cultural asset and of the place, and in the same time are well filtered for the environment of recreation, without overwhelming with too much detailed content. Through the Pilot Projects developed in Sagittarius Project the partners aimed to develop a mega touristic product based on a theme and a route/trail with regional expansion in Southeast Europe. The cultural product was developed on the principle of modern valuing and interpretation of cultural heritage and on the usage of modern ICT devices as main tools for facilitating on-site consumption. Another attractive feature is that each Pilot Project developed interconnections with touristic routes from the surroundings of selected cultural assets or aboard, on a connected cultural heritage theme. In this way, a new model of touristic routes is developed on a long term, as a link of a conceptual framework of consumption based on predefined cultural themes.

We also defined the profile of the consumer of such innovative cultural heritage products in order to overcome the shortage of our survey from the representatively perspective. We presented our pilot projects to young audience and analyzed the impact on them from the perspective of satisfied consumer, interested in future similar experiences, as individual or in group. We also tried to evaluate the impact of the products provided by the pilot projects to mature consumers, familiar with ITC devices and interested in in-situ visit.

3. The methodology of the satisfaction survey

The qualitative research had a demand side approach, with a special focus on innovative / modern consumption products and services based on less known cultural heritage assets or a new approach of the very well-known assets.

We based our research on the assumption that today's consumer values the emotions, the unique interpretation of the cultural heritage and interactive participation during onsite visits.

The main objectives of the satisfaction survey took into account the following aspects:

- a new innovative approach in heritage interpretation;
- a link between historical reality related to assets and events or actions undertaken by the society, local environment, etc;
- creating a bridge overtime and rediscover the positive externalities from the past for the future human development: green touristic products, heritage conservation, environmental non-invasive cultural consumption, e-tourism;
- identifying the efficient use of ICT products for interpreting and valuing the cultural heritage;
- viral dissemination of knowledge related to heritage assets;
• identify the extent to which modern consumer accepts involvement in cultural consumption and its development (assuming the interactive role of knowledge and heritage assets interpretation).

According to Vasile, V., and Login I.A., (2013), “the concept of modern valuing of cultural heritage assets is based on creation of a new generation of products and services, more adapted to the actual customer profiles, especially for those using IT devices”. This survey also aimed to identifying possible ways of defining the cultural offer in response to expected demand of the modern young consumer. The Pilot Projects developed in Sagittarius Project (themathical cultural route based on innovative approach of selected heritage assets valuing) were designed by each partner and tested in situ before the questionnaires.

The survey had a socio-economic approach and was addressed to the young consumers which are friendly with handling ICT devices and social media. Our assessments are based on 164 valid questionnaires in situ conducted in specific cultural areas from 7 countries and 9 geographic areas: Greece (1), Italy (2), Hungary (1), Bulgaria (1), Romania (2), Slovenia (1), and Croatia (1). The cultural assets selection (113 assets) was made by national experts. All these assets were included into national touristic routes and interconnected through a mega trail – able to stimulate multidimensional valuing of common history and traditions in SE Europe. The survey addressed to aspects of emotion, cognition, knowledge, satisfaction regarding cultural consumption, and also geographical accessibility, economic affordability, social and multicultural identity; communication and intellectual stimulus, for interactive participation in the cultural tourism trails, based on in situ visits, in association with social media tools for detailed, diversified and participative consumption.

The questionnaires were addressed (F2F) to the tourists presented in places selected for designing a pilot project, after presentation the prototype – for each area one pilot project – subsequent stimulation (post-stimulation) of cultural consumption, either as a repeating visiting asset, or as complementarily (subsequent cultural consumption based on links provided by connectivity between Pilot Projects Areas).

We were looking for the calibration of the offer model dedicated to young consumers and also for selection of the most suitable cultural products able to stimulate them for in situ visit. Because we addressed to the future consumers (more familiar with internet facilities for information and virtual visits to some cultural assets such as castles, churches, national parks, historical inns, etc.), we subsequently attempted to identify commonalities and main trends in terms of youth cultural consumption pattern.

The sample used was not intended to be statistically representative - it was a first stage evaluation of the impact and the consumer immediate reaction/response to new products related to interactive cultural consumption, designed according to the coordinates mentioned above. Some relevant issues are related to the analysis of:

• definition of the relevance of the selected thematic route, underlined by the place/area identity (cultural identity) and the place/area image (tourism icon).
• definition of the distinctive identity for each asset and for the entire thematic route, as stimulus for mix consumption (in situ visit associated to ITC services for facilitating interactive participation in heritage interpretation).
• information source about assets taken into consideration in cultural route (such as travel agency, mass media, Internet, from school, from friends, relatives).
• characterisation of the multidimensional accessibility of the selected assets (affordability, easy access, availability, the information availability, relevance for different consumers’ profile etc.).
• significance of the “story” designed for integration of the assets selected into the thematic route (significance for a wide group of consumers, for young consumers, providing uniqueness among global heritage assets, stimulating local heritage consumption types, etc.).
• connectivity and complementarity of the products/services for stimulating cultural heritage consumption in the Pilot Project Area, related to cultural products/services, complementarities with other cultural products known in the place, participatory practices of the local community / host community, etc.
• contribution of the Pilot Project to recognition of the place assets, branding the cultural image of the Project Area, activate local connectivity for cultural heritage products, etc.

† A detailed analysis of the survey can be found in the thematic study conducted in Sagittarius Project to be published; for more information, please send an e-mail to inst.ec.nat@gmail.com.
4. Main results from survey analysis

The satisfaction survey aimed to identify the consumers’ reaction to a new form of heritage cultural products, based on ICT and that address to the audience a challenging interpretation of the heritage asset, more related to present significance and motivation for consumption. The most part of visitors are willing to see new things and/or to have unique experiences. The persons who answered the survey accepted the idea the presentation of Pilot Projects give a new and innovative interpretation of less known historical information. Was concluded that is useful a combination of historical knowledge, of information easy to obtain through current media tools with local details, with specific interpretations based on local stories and oral tradition.

Fig. 1. The Project Pilot provided new interpretation of well-known assets (%)
Source: authors' calculations.

Fig. 2. The Project Pilot provided new story about local heritage assets (%)
Source: authors' calculations.

Regarding the fact that it is possible that visitors have information about assets before in situ experiences, the majority of answers underline the idea that, in general, the assets are known by the consumers. Some persons have expressed high interest in a new approach of the known information. It was appreciated that, in general, through their innovative way of developing a “the story” stimulate the post-visitation interest of searching detailed information about the asset and in some cases create stimuli for later consumption (re-visiting the assets, visiting of local or transnational assets with historical and traditions connectivity, depending on individual preferences).

Consumers’ perception regarding the Pilot Project potential to present a different approach or vision is quite asymmetric with the previous visibility of the heritage assets. For example, the Pilot project presentation in Greece was based on the idea of sharing detailed information about old and well known asset (Rhodes island), but for Romania the Pilot Project aimed to reveal a new image/the real one about a famous ruler, associated through time with a lot of “tradable stories” (contribution of Vlad Tepes – the ruler, not the vampire – to the state building and the lessons from present democracy). The answers support the idea that modern consumers are open to new approaches and interpretation of the heritage, but they can and do contribute to support or not the new vision, depending on personal educational profile and not only. So, in this respect it is worst to create such innovative cultural project products, but we have to be very carefully with the distance between historic truth proved by evidence and the provider particular vision or interpretation. From some perspective, some heritage assets, even very old, are modern through personal identity or significance.
The modern consumption through ICT products facilitates the expansion of the same product to several categories of consumers differentiated by age, social and professional profile. New consumption models are defined not only by the diversity of cultural heritage interpretation approach, but also through the possibility to develop group consumption in which participants from tourists group interact. It was underlined that is more important to support interaction and co-creation than to simply present passively “a story”. The story presentation was well received by the interviewed persons. Thus, this represented a real value added for personal cultural heritage consumption and also adequate for the general public.

The majority of the interviewed persons agreed with the significance of the Pilot Project story for a wide group of consumers and for stimulating young consumers. The idea of providing uniqueness among global heritage assets and inspiring interpretation of local heritage underlined the answers of the majority which agreed with this topic, and also with the possibility of considering Pilot Project story significant to enrich the local heritage. The Pilot Project story is also considered to be a stimulus for the local heritage consumption (products, events, customs, art, ways of life, etc.).
An interesting aspect is represented by the multidimensional way of interpretation by consumers of a Pilot Project type of cultural product. For modern cultural consumption to be sustained and to be complementary with current forms of tourism, it should also provide stimulus of the locally economic and social development through oriented business approach. The evaluation of visitors regarding satisfaction with the operational reliability of the Pilot Project, with the expertise that Pilot Project is providing new and interesting information/stories about people and places connected to the assets, and also with aspects that underline the Pilot Project capabilities to enrich knowledge, to contribute to a better understanding of the local cultural heritage shows that the majority of participants to our survey agreed with discussed topics.
Regarding the appreciation of the connectivity and complementarily of the products/services for cultural heritage consumption stimulating in the Pilot Project Area, some analysed aspects were: cultural products/services’ complementarities with other cultural products in the place, participatory practices of the local community / host community, regional networking, local provision and providers of various products/services (information points, centres of resources, etc.).

In general, per Project Partners, the answers of interviewed persons were positive. The participation of the local people in the growth of tourism from the area is important for the stimulation of cultural heritage consumption. Also, finding interesting stories about assets from Pilot Project may contribute for developing tourism and employment opportunities. For youth people it is important to create short information which can be accessed from various ICT devices.
The Pilot Project developed by project partners is considered of high importance by interviewed persons. This is due to the fact that it can contribute not only to the recognition of place asset and to the stimulation of a new approach of well known assets, but also to branding cultural image of Project Area, activate local connectivity for cultural heritage products, and providing new type of cultural heritage products.

5. Final conclusions

Tourism for the young generations is developing on a different consumption pattern, because of multiple expectations - from knowledge to amusement in another place than the vicinity of their houses. The individual decision regarding touristic mobility derives from the stimulation/challenge of an on-site visit and the interest to pass over the simple level of getting informed through media. Tourism can facilitate mobility and ensure comfort conditions and modern services, but it is important to trigger those factors that stimulate mobility for new experiences and information that can be obtained only through on-site visits. The interactive cultural consumption is more adequate for an offer specific to youth, but presented in packages adapted to the profile of age group and education level. The consumption behaviour changes, so the market of offers restructures, especially from the perspective of touristic motivation and of thematic touristic consumption as an integrated package of services. Regarding the tourism model, the consumption package includes a component of cultural consumption, often as an option, which always adds more knowledge and experience regarding local specificity. This factor defines the destination considering the standard categories of touristic (i.e. relaxing getaways) and business offers, especially regarding the organization of meetings – congresses, conferences, etc. (where the offer of cultural consumption is complementary to the business tourism, but it can define the location, when it is not predefined by the business – i.e. a thematic conference that can be organized in different locations, but the difference is represented by the dates of cultural services).

In all cases, the modern element of cultural consumption that remains predominant as a differentiation factor of decision regarding the final location is represented by the participatory consumption and the unique approach of cultural objective (a new vision regarding a well-known cultural asset). Moreover, the cultural consumption increases in places less known or less explored by the general public. In these cases, the decisions are taken by considering accessibility factors – geography and financially (youngers are less interested in mobility and their financial resources are limited). The recent orientation in the domain of policy in tourism supports this kind of approach – digital and social media for new services products, targeted products (OECD, 2014, p. 12), to support local identity, to develop traditional industries etc.

Personalized cultural services providing support high satisfaction in consumption process, stimulate viral dissemination of emotions or final perception, after on-site visit, to friends or simply to other interested persons, by sharing experiences in real time or post-consume through internet and additional ITC facilities – Facebook, e-cloud, Twitter etc. In some cases, the satisfaction creates stimulus for repeating experience. Mainly, it happens in cases of active participation and co-creation on site, or, simply to complete the experience through complementary cultural consumption – detailed information and in-depth research of the local specificity, temporary integration in day-by-day life for rich inedited experiences based on traditions or special local activities, traditional events etc.

The access to previous information sources, through internet and social media allows a targeted consumption and qualitatively higher. It also allows a reorganization of demand types of support services – consumers come already informed, willing to gain new and special information, to experience on-site, to participate to events and to be implied in activities regarding traditions and culture, being able to share in real time their opinions and emotions with their friends.

From the analysis of the survey, we can underline the following conclusions:

- There is an openness of the consumers to new types of products. The need for change of the consumption model, in order to be more appropriated to current facilities, is important, especially for young consumers;
- There is a need to motivate their travel expenses associated to a new cultural consumption over what a used way to find information may provide through media systems.
• There is an ongoing need to visit and see the heritage tourist assets as a completion of the informing process if it reveals unvalued aspects of cultural heritage;
• Today’s consumer values emotions, unique interpretation and participation;
• The group consumption promoted through Pilot Projects developed in Sagittarius Project seems to be better received by the young people, because they have a higher propensity for group consumption – the consumer appreciates the strong bond that is created between the local economy and heritage consumption through crafts, through the idea of participating together in various events and so on.

From our qualitative research we can conclude that the current consumer profile is based on the following attributes:

• Current consumer has a high rate of participation in visits at cultural heritage assets, even if there are only in online environment (virtual tour), and his participation is motivated, having, however, some preferences in the field;
• He assess the institutions in the field for the activity developed from the point of view of quality of the supply, quantity, prices, etc.;
• His assessment addresses issues regarding the sources of information on cultural offer, as well as evaluating the overall cultural life and its evolution over the past period of time;
• He is interested in digital culture, including mobile communications technologies, gaming and overall technology, within and beyond the internet, trying always to use digital technology in everyday life in wider contexts;
• He is always interested by the idea of fulfilling the need to know or to solve some dilemmas regarding various topics of cultural heritage stories, and he is trying to understand this by bringing a certain story from the past in his present time;
• He is an informed consumer and increasingly selective, and also open to innovation and participation. Motivation of travel and on-site consumption of cultural offer must be clearly defined for him, and must provide intellectual satisfaction and incitement, knowledge and information less disseminated on the media channels;
• He is a youth, a good user of ICT devices, is skilled and networking targeted, with a particular aesthetic sense, who likes to visit and to learn new things about cultural heritage assets, but he also likes to share them with other people, friends, relatives, or even to visit the assets again together with other groups of people very interested of the knowledge of cultural heritage. Thus, the consumer is more sophisticated, more modern. For him, knowledge and beliefs are important parts and he likes to fit parts together in some logical fashion;
• He is open to share experiences and support networking and connectivity with other similar cultural areas, being targeted to return to the visited places for other similar experiences or to go in the same route in groups with friends or family, but based on similar quality standards. This means an attitude directed towards local development based on innovative interpretation of cultural heritage entrepreneurship for organizing events and traditional crafts, etc., into a profitable partnership (with local authorities and other public and private stakeholders in each pilot project).

Therefore, the main challenge from the supply side is to consider a deeply revising of the consumption model of cultural heritage products. It means to start from the demand perspective, of significant changes defined especially by the youth and to embrace the innovative approach, to consider the interactive, co-participative components as main drivers for revitalizing and diversifying the cultural heritage consumption. Consumers’ satisfaction degree remains a signal for policy changes in this domain and valuing heritage assets is a sustainable way for local business development and active social inclusion.

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