Getting **youth** on board with **co-creative tourism**: A step toward **sustainable development** in small towns and **rural** communities

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Abstract | Creative tourism, known for its role in fostering sustainable development, holds potential for revitalizing small towns and rural communities by empowering local stakeholders. As an understudied segment of the sustainable agenda and creative tourism niche, youth plays a vital role in the pursuit of relevant development strategies. This case study exploratory analysis of Miranda do Douro, a rural community in Portugal, aims to understand the most effective ways to encourage local youth to participate in co-creative tourism activities. Through benchmarking and content analysis of semi-structured interviews of both local youth and adult stakeholders, key themes emerged regarding youth motivation and success factors. Findings suggest that youth and adult stakeholders believe their participation in co-creation could help achieve steps toward sustainable development by helping to preserve the culture, creating relevant skill building opportunities for youth and decreasing the negative effects of rural exodus. The research provided an insight to the perspectives of youth in creative tourism and the disconnect between youth and adult stakeholders. Empirically, it provided practical 'strategies for success', induced from the analysis, and backed by literature, for organizations looking to promote youth engagement in co-creative tourism activities.

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1. Introduction

Creative tourism is an emerging niche market that has proven to result in sustainable social, cultural, and economic development (Duxbury et al., 2021). By enacting creative tourism in small towns and rural communities and giving agency to community members, sustainable and even regenerative practices could enhance life for community members by creating jobs and supporting overall economic development (Lane et al., 2022). Furthermore, youth have been identified as the leading changemakers in the pursuit of sustainable development (Vasta et al., 2019).

However, the role of local youth participation in creative tourism activities is little studied and undocumented segment of the sustainable agenda (Canosa et al., 2018). Therefore, through an exploratory case study analysis of Miranda do Douro, Portugal, a rural community in the interior of the country, this study aims to understand the most effective ways to encourage local youth to participate in co-creative tourism activities alongside national and foreign tourists. By understanding current motivators and determining what is missing in current motivation strategies, small towns and rural communities can successfully increase engagement levels amongst local youth. The final objective being to promote steps toward sustainable cultural development through cultural preservation, social development through skill building opportunities, and economic development by increasing employment opportunities. All of which would ultimately contribute to the reversal of the negative effects of rural exodus.

More specifically, through participation in co-creative tourism activities, youth would learn about their culture by educating visitors about their heritage, helping to preserve it for future generations; engage with fellow community-members (both young and old), helping to develop feelings of cultural pride and empowerment; foster mutual understanding and respect through host-visitor interaction via cultural exchange practices; and learn practical skills (leadership and communication) to increase employability and decrease the need for rural exodus.

The methods of analysis included a benchmarking of organizations working with youth and tourism, and content analysis of youth and stakeholder interviews from the case study community to understand current expectations from youth and define any gaps between youth and stakeholders.

1.1 Motivation

The motivation for the study is outwardly sustainable development. However, more profoundly, there is a clear lack of research surrounding local youth participation in tourism (Canosa et al., 2018), as no papers were found with similar research topics in a SCOPUS database search. This is despite the vital role that youth play in sustainability, and with the proven results of tourism as a driver for development (Vasta et al., 2019). Thus, focusing on local youth in tourism development is a natural partnership. The United Nations (UN) World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) agrees, hosting the first Global Youth Tourism Summit (GYTS) in 2021 highlighting that, "Tourism is a proven source of opportunity for young people – in cities and in rural communities, from every educational background and in every global region".

However, there is currently an abundance of literature about the success of tourism in general as a sustainable development strategy, helping to identify the direction of the research topic; in particular, sustainable tourism for rural development and creative tourism as a local development strategy. The UN has identified tourism as a catalyst for development and reaching the sustainable development goals (SDGs), implementing many programs advancing the sector for this cause. Currently, creative tourism is frequently used as a tool for development in rural communities, as is discussed by L. Almeida (2021) and Duxbury and Richards (2019) in their works.

1.2 Article Structure

This study begins with a review of relevant literature. It outlines the specific methods used in this qualitative research analysis, including the collection and analysis methods. The results of the benchmarking analysis and case study interviews are detailed, showcasing subjects' understanding of local cultures and co-creation, their motivations to participation, the critical success factors necessary for co-creative activities to occur, and the projected impacts they would have. Results include a discussion about the connections between benchmarking, case study, and literature. It provides practical strategies for communities to implement to further their chances of obtaining levels of sustainable development. Finally, the contributions, limitations and next steps of the study are discussed as this research is the first step to understanding youth's involvement in co-creative tourism.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework includes the key concepts of literature about cultural, co-creative and rural tourism, sustainable development, non-formal education and youth education. The summary connects the literature with the research analysis, outlining how co-creative tourism and youth engagement help support sustainable development.

2.1 Co-creative Tourism

Co-creative tourism, which emerged from the merging of cultural tourism and the co-creative business model, focuses on the active participation of tourists in destination-specific activities helping to foster deep connections with local culture. The cultural tourist, who comprises a significant portion of global tourism, has evolved from wanting to look at tangible heritage to seeking authentic, hands-on experiences. This desire for engagement has led to the creation of creative tourism as its own niche market. First defined by Richards and Raymond (2000), the idea of creative tourism has been expanded upon by various authors highlighting its potential for fostering sustainable tourism practices (Raymond, 2007), cultural exchange (Huhmarniemi et al., 2021), and the preservation of culture (Remoaldo, 2022). Common creative tourism activities include cooking classes using local ingredients, workshops on traditional arts and crafts, such as weaving wool or ceramics, and exhibitions, such as a dance festival, featuring teaching and sharing moments.

Co-creation, a concept introduced by Prahalad and Ramaswamy in 2000, emphasizes the relationship between company and customer, showcasing the 'joint creation of value' and labelling consumers as collaborators and co-developers. Minkiewicz et al. (2014) further expanded this concept to include culture and heritage experiences, highlighting co-production, engagement, and personalization.

Combining the principles of creative tourism and co-creation, co-creative tourism emphasizes active participation and engagement of both tourists and locals in traditional creative activities. This study adopts a definition of co-creative tourism that focuses on the equitable contribution of both groups in jointly creating meaningful experiences. However, the focus of the investigation lies in the participation of local youth in co-creative tourism activities, as the motivation factors and benefits for travellers are already well-defined (Raymond, 2007; Richards, 2014; Duxbury et al., 2021; CBI, 2021; and Remoaldo, 2022).

2.2 Sustainable Development & Co-creative Tourism

Tourism, recognized as one of the largest global industries, and one with a significant female workforce, holds a crucial role in sustainable development (UNWTO, n.d.b). The UNWTO (n.d.a.) defines sustainable tourism as taking account of current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, while addressing the needs of all relevant actors.

Rural tourism is seen as a sustainable tourism option that plays a vital role for the most at-risk communities, particularly regarding heritage preservation (Lane et al., 2022). As sustainable tourism involves community-led action, it is notable that local tourism initiatives, especially in rural communities tend to empower residents, foster economic growth and enhance place attachment and cultural pride. Moreover, these positive results help reduce emigration (rural exodus) by creating job opportunities and incentivizing young people to stay in their communities (Kastenholz, Paço & Nave, 2023). Creative tourism in rural regions can provide social, cultural and economic value, helping to "reimagine community self-representation through tourism" (Duxbury, 2020, p. 13). It also helps attract travellers to rural regions they might not otherwise visit, benefitting both the local community and giving the tourist a unique experience – something cultural tourists seek out (Duxbury, 2020). Moreover, Atsız & Cifci (2022), found social and cultural motives for providing meal-sharing experiences in Istanbul as important as economic motives, thus revealing the large potential of triggering cultural and social enrichment amongst those locals engaging with co-creative cultural tourism, apparently increasing engagement with one's culture, place and community.

Cultural and creative tourism, acknowledged by the UNWTO and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), are instrumental in sustainable development efforts (2015, 2019). They help promote social integration and cultural exchange, while also providing economic support as cultural tourists spend significantly more money and stay longer than the average tourist (CBI Ministry of Foreign Affairs et al., 2021). When aligned with the UN SDGs, creative tourism emphasizes local engagement and the use of local resources (Duxbury, 2021). It fosters community building, local involvement, and a sense of belonging (F. Almeida, 2021). Duxbury, Albino and de Carvalho (2021) showcase various dimensions of creative tourism, including fostering cultural revitalization and sustainability and opening space for intercultural dialogue and understanding.

Wisansing and Vongvisitsin add that, "By bringing local culture and pride to the forefront, it also creates a networking platform for individuals of different nationalities and backgrounds,

thus fostering dialogue among cultures and encouraging cultural diversity and creativity" (2019, p. 125).

Though co-creative tourism can create negative setbacks to economic development, most authors tend to focus on the positive outcomes offsetting the negative. It can provide income and employment opportunities and utilize local natural and cultural resources (Prabhakaran et al., 2014), encourage entrepreneurial activity due to low level of 'entry hurdles' (Zuluaga & Guerra, 2021) and contribute to the diversification and innovation of the tourist experience and change existing models of tourism development (Richards, 2014).

2.3 Youth Engagement, Sustainable Development & Tourism

The pedagogical approach of engaging youth in learning experiences through active participation is not new. Engagement strategies include talking and writing about content, relating it to past experiences and applying it to students' daily lives (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and highlighting students' points of view to showcase different world perspectives, thus enriching others through shared knowledge (Alexander & Murphy, 1994). According to Bonwell & Eison (1991), facilitating active student participation helps increase achievement, positive behaviors and belonging in students which thus amplifies the level of participation.

Applying these practices outside the traditional classroom in non-formal scenarios, such as after-school programs, workshops, or through travel, can lead to more equitable opportunities for young people, promote active citizenship, and contributes to economic and social development (Morciano et al., 2015). Non-formal education is seen as a tool for active participation, particularly as it was originally developed for rural communities lacking in traditional educational models. Through non-formal learning activities, in this case, co-creative tourism activities, local youth can actively participate in their communities, learning practical skills not always taught in the formal setting and engaging with their culture, thus promoting place attachment and social sustainability. According to Duxbury, et al. (2021), those skills include creative capacities, notions of history, language, biology, teamwork skills, empathy, and other basic social skills.

The UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs highlights the role of youth in achieving sustainable social development as a partner in reaching the SDGs and one of the targeted 'underserved' communities the SDGs were written for. The motivation behind including youth in the sustainability conversation is obvious. Sustainable development is explicitly targeted

toward preservation for future generations and youth are that very future we are preserving for. Therefore, not only are youth the stakeholder group most directly affected by sustainable development in the long-term (or lack of it), but they are also often unrepresented at the sustainable development table.

F. Almeida suggests that by involving youth it would "lead to a future that brings generations closer together and promotes new forms of communication and knowledge transfer". Not to mention the "creation of new concepts, products, economic activities, and innovation by reinventing production methods" (2021, p. 203). Widayati et al (2024) identified the role of local youth in a project of 'sustainable community-based agritourism of educational herbal gardens in a rural area of Indonesia', as understood by community members (both young and older residents interviewed), who call for young residents' involvement in managing community empowerment-based tourism, given their energy, creativity and digital competences, also helping them better communicate to potential markets. Moreover, Bermúdez-González et al (2023) found, in a cultural tourism context, that 'Generation Z's community involvement, place attachment, and positive perceptions toward tourism development directly influence their intentions to work in their World Heritage Site hometown', which in rural areas' context is most important for maintaining these towns and areas alive, particularly in peripherical areas which the youth often decide to leave due to missing job opportunities.

As the future leaders of tomorrow, focusing on local youth in tourism development is a natural partnership. The role of culture and creativity in the sustainable development of youth is particularly strong as the creative sector employs more young people (15–29-year-olds) than any other economic sector, creating 29.5 million jobs overall (UNESCO, 2021).

Once again, the positive benefits and negative impacts of tourism will be felt by all populations, young and old alike. Jaafar et al. said it poignantly, "It is imperative that youth, as the recipients of such opportunities [creating jobs and economic advancement], be given a voice in any community tourism development and conservation management programs" (2015, p. 157). While outmigration of the young has been identified as a barrier to development dynamics in many Portuguese rural regions, using engaging co-creative tourism activities to encourage youth to stay via skill building and job opportunities could be one method to prevent the negative effects of rural exodus.

2.4 Research Connection

The aforementioned literature has created a context for the benchmarking analysis, formulation of interview questions and definition of overarching themes of analysis for the investigation including heritage preservation, co-creation, skill building, place identity and engagement. It helped provide an understanding of how co-creative tourism plays a role in sustainable development in the theoretical realm and how organizations are already implementing it in the practical realm.

3. Methods

A qualitative exploratory approach was chosen for this study due to the limited existing research on youth involvement in co-creative tourism, aiming to open the discussion for further analysis. The methodology consisted first of a benchmarking analysis of four organizations involved in youth and tourism, followed by semi-structured interviews and a field study conducted between February and September 2023.

3.1 Benchmarking

A preliminary benchmarking analysis was chosen within the qualitative approach to help 'paint a picture' about tourism, youth, and sustainable development worldwide before focusing on one case study community. The benchmarking analysis helped to identify the processes other successful organizations used when working with local youth in tourism and other social development arenas. Ultimately, four organizations were found that met the following criterion:

i.   Work with youth (ages 14-25);

ii.   youth central leadership, or co-creative role;

iii.   element of education and tourism;

iv.   and sufficient information available online to understand the best practices.

The organizations promoted youth as tourism hosts in various capacities, but each had related goals to the investigation - promoting local youth development via sustainable social practices.

The organizations JUST ACT, The Zambia and Taste Cultural Food Tours, Australia were found via a Google search using "youth tour guide", the Youth Council of Opatija, Croatia through the search, "local youth involvement tourism", and the *Associação de Caretos de Podence*, Portugal was already known to the author as a good example within Portugal.

The areas of study within the benchmarking analysis were derived from the very nature of benchmarking (analysing best practices and weaknesses), and two common business practices for strategic planning: SWOT Analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) and Critical Success Factor Analysis, or conditioning factors (identifying relevant factors which contribute to the survival of an organization). The areas of study outside best practices were included based on the literature associated with cultural and creative tourism, sustainable development, and youth development.

The study of the organizations was undertaken using primary data sourced from the websites of the organizations, including social media, and any secondary sources found with relevant information (usually news articles detailing the projects). Analysis was done manually using Microsoft Excel, pulling out key words and actions between organization, and practices that received positive (best practices) or negative (deficiencies) feedback.

3.2 Case Study

3.2.1 Miranda do Douro

The research used a case study analysis to thoroughly understand the feasibility, practicality, motivations, and potential impacts of youth participation in co-creative tourism activities at a micro level. By understanding the motivations and potential impacts from one community, a case study assists in better understanding the specific nuances that small towns and rural communities face and how a small change can hopefully create a positive impact wherever the findings of this study are implemented.

Miranda do Douro, a rural community in the interior of Portugal, was chosen as the case study community as it has a population of less than 10,000, has significant cultural heritage, and is suffering from rural exodus where the population continues to age. Miranda do Douro's cultural heritage, among others, includes its own language, *Mirandese*, traditional song and dance, the *pauliteiros* and *gaiteiros*, and a native breed of donkey. This heritage was highlighted in the study as interview subjects actively participated in the cultural offer.

3.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually, involving six adult stakeholders and six local youths aged 14-25 from Miranda do Douro. Among the adult stakeholders, four were active members of local cultural associations, and two were affiliated with cultural

development and preservation organizations. Interviews covered themes derived from relevant literature, including role of heritage, co-creation, motivation to participate in co-creative tourism, tourism impact perceptions/expectations, conditioning factors, skills, identity and engagement.

Interviews took place between February and August 2023 with the goal to understand the difference between what motivated youth and what adult stakeholders thought motivated youth, as well as the difference in understanding about the positive and negative impacts of youth involvement in co-creative tourism activities.

The semi-structured interviews were analysed using content analysis and deductive reasoning. The main ideas of each defined theme were deduced from the interviews, while further themes were induced throughout the analysis process. The main themes were youth motivation to participate, critical success factors, and perceived impacts. The process involved manual content analysis using Microsoft Excel. Using the coding guide (deductive) and focusing on key words and the research goals (inductive), any content that related to the category was pulled out and added to the spreadsheet. Both direct quotes and summaries of themes, opinions, and ideas were added. They were later compared and cross-referenced to answer the research question (deductive) and any new emerging themes to establish insights to theory were pulled out (inductive). The data was also compared from each phase, creating connections between the benchmarking analysis, adult stakeholder interviews and youth subject interviews. To ensure validity and decrease author bias, triangulation and respondent validation were used alongside thick description.

4. Results

4.1 Benchmarking Results

By identifying best practices, critical success factors, and deficiencies of four organizations working with youth in tourism, the following strategies were determined to be the most successful in helping to increase local youth participation:

  i.   Provide non-formal learning experiences with hands-on activities.

  ii.   Teach practical skills applicable for the future.

  iii.   Empower youth by giving them agency in the decision-making processes.

  iv.   Establish space for youth to engage with their culture on their own.

v.   Promote peer-to-peer interactions.

vi.   Practice genuine and meaningful follow-up procedures.

vii.   Encourage youth of all ages and genders to participate.

viii.   Build networks with various partners.

Table 1 provides a more detailed description. The benchmarking analysis was the preliminary analysis in this study and helped guide the interview questions for the case study investigation. Thus, the interview questions included emerging themes such as youth engagement, skill building, empowerment, peer interaction, and teamwork.

Table 1. Strategies for youth participation in tourist activities – Benchmarking analysis

Theme	Youth Council of Opatija	*Associação de Caretos de Podence*	Taste Cultural Food Tours	JUST ACT
Youth Engagement	Giving youth agency; supporting empowerment; public space to be creative/express ideas to public Training youth for future employment with practical skills (entrepreneurial seminars)	Encouraging participation of youth (local and ancestral) Giving youth agency and a voice Training youth in disseminating culture (via festival participation & museum work)	Training for immigrant youth as guides (English, business, customer service, guiding, cultural diversity) Educating local children on cultural diversity via school tours	Training for local youth as guides (up to 30 years old) Promoting peer-to-peer youth interaction & education
Social Sustainability	Creating sense of community through opening of public space for tourist & local alike	Social inclusion, cultural preservation & intergenerational dialogue	Promoting social cohesion, mutual respect and social tolerance between people of diverse backgrounds (work primarily with immigrants and women)	Establishing community-based, pro-poor, responsible and sustainable tourism through guide training of local youth

Networks	City Council, local enterprises (public & private), university	National and local government and associations, and international organizations	Local government and non-governmental organizations	Government ministries, national institutes, international organizations, and charities
Processes	Incentives for youth via competition & prize money Hands-on training with professionals & peer-to-peer learning (also leads to networking) Partner funding for youth to realize their ideas	UNESCO status Government partner & funding Social media presence Long-term plans	Trainings in basic, practical skills Building community network Platform to work (they train & they provide the business for the tour guides to work) Bringing multiple cultures together creating mutual respect & self-worth	Tour guides training tour guides Network for funding Consistent follow-up and follow-through

Source: Authors' Elaboration

4.2 Case Study Results

The case study of Miranda do Douro yielded a variety of results through the qualitative semi-structured interviews. Most notably, the connection with strategies identified in the benchmarking analysis and the disconnect between adult stakeholders and youth. The findings regarding heritage and co-creation, engagement and skill building, motivation, critical success factors, and impacts are outlined below. Finally, various strategies are presented for small towns and rural communities to implement to their co-creative tourism activities to help achieve some level of sustainable development.

4.2.1 Heritage & Co-creation

The semi-structured interviews revealed that both local youth and adult stakeholders agree that regional cultural heritage is unique and important, and efforts should be made to preserve it and that co-creative tourism could be used to help preserve local culture for future generations. Their suggestions for co-creative activities were widespread and matched much of the current

offer, such as cooking classes, and artisan and dance workshops. This reinforced literature which found success in similar activities in rural areas (Carvalho et al., 2016).

4.2.2 Engagement & Skill building

When asked how they would be engaged in co-creative tourism activities, youth subjects had a lot to say about what currently was not working. Much of what youth indicated as engaging strategies - passionate practitioners and hands-on activities - clearly align with current expectations of cultural and co-creative tourists (Duxbury et al., 2021; CBI, 2021). It is relevant to note the disconnect between youth and adult stakeholders when asked about engagement practices. Adult stakeholders noted this was one of their most challenging responsibilities. By including youth in the conversation, adult stakeholders, including the municipality, are given a better insight into successful strategies for youth involvement, thus increasing youth participation.

Another engagement strategy proposed by youth subjects was follow-up activities. They suggested using technology to continue activities at home and to keep participants connected. Sincere follow-up was also identified in the benchmarking analysis, confirming that follow-up could help participants, tourists, and locals alike feel more connected to the activity and to one another, encouraging return visits, and reinforcing social connections.

4.2.3 Motivation: What do youth need to participate?

Many of the motivating factors cited by the subjects reinforced literature, including cultural preservation, interest, socialization (Wisansing & Vongvisitsin, 2019; Duxbury et al., 2021), learning new skills (F. Almeida, 2021), engaging environments (Chickering & Garrison, 1987; Bonwell, 1991; Alexander & Murphy, 1994), and travel opportunities (Canosa et al., 2017). However, the idea of incorporating technology, using passionate practitioners, sharing responsibilities with other youth, and highlighting the uniqueness of the heritage emerged as new strategies through analysis. Table 2 highlights the results.

Table 2. Youth motivation factors for participation in co-creative tourism activities

Motivation Factor	Description
Cultural preservation	• Promotion - sharing with others • Sustainability – preserving for future generations • Cultural pride – expanding pride to all generations

Peer & community influence	• Community buy-in – encouraging all community members to participate or promote activities • Community building – reestablishing connections post-Covid 19
Socialization	• Being with friends • *Convivio* (community) • Companionship
Travel opportunities	• Travelling nationally & internationally • Cultural exchange with national & international tourists
Interest	• Likeable – establishing enjoyable activities youth like to participate in • Hobby – promoting non-academic experiences • 'Therapeutic' – a safe space outside of school for stress relief • Wide-range - create differentiated activities appealing to diverse interests
Unique culture	• Unrivalled elsewhere – Miranda do Douro boasts 'one-of-a-kind' traditions • 'Cool' culture
Engaging environment	• Technology – include youth in technological advancement of activities • Innovation – constantly updating activities • Creativity – emphasize creativity in all stages of activity (planning & implementation) • Passion – practitioners and participants • Teamwork - intergenerational
Learning new skills	• Building new interests • New opportunity
Incorporation of technology	• Modern age • Social media
Passionate practitioners	• Passion extends to participants

Source: Authors' Elaboration

Only four themes overlapped between the two subject groups - cultural preservation, socialization, travel opportunities, and the draw of the uniqueness of the culture, showing the disconnect between groups.

All six youth subjects cited 'being with friends' as one of the top motivators for participation. The idea that youth learn from other youth is not new (Alexander & Murphy, 1994), though still a challenging factor as ensuring friends will always be available to participate together is not always possible. Therefore, motivational efforts will have to be supplemented in other ways.

Youth mentioned passionate practitioners in engagement strategies as well as motivational strategies. As it is already an established characteristic of tourist guides to engage their groups by making connections, asking questions, telling stories and being generally excited about their line of work (Carneiro, 2021), these skills could be passed on to youth, facilitating in practical skill building opportunities, and ultimately increasing participation levels.

> I think when it comes to events, I think the environment is really important – no one wants to be in an environment that has not conditions to it. But most important, that has people that are not really passionate about anything… (youth subject, female).

4.2.4   Critical Success Factors: What factors should be in place for youth participation to be successful?

The conditioning factors were presented by youth and adult stakeholder subjects as supports and barriers to youth participation in co-creative activities. When combined, these positive and negative elements become the critical success factors of co-creative tourism (see Table 3). Therefore, the results from the deductive conditioning factors are discussed from both subject's point of view, as well as touching on the inductive themes that emerged from the analysis.

Table 3. Stakeholder & Youth Critical Success Factors

Stakeholders	Both	Youth
Networks	Mentorship and stakeholder partnerships	Early engagement
Repatriation	Government support	Publicity
	Decrease rural exodus	Current tourism dynamic
Interest	Logistics	Economic incentive
	Technology	Innovation

Source: Authors' Elaboration

The themes reinforced by literature included the need for stakeholder partnerships and government support, creating partnerships and networks, combating the negative effects of rural exodus, and working around logistical challenges. Emerging themes included mentorship, early

engagement, widespread publicity, staying on top of the evolving tourism dynamic, providing economic incentives, and using technology and innovative strategies.

Partnerships and networks are vital for any tourism development plan (Brandão et al., 2023) and both interview groups agree. According to the stakeholder subjects, partnerships with government entities and other local actors are necessary and both groups highlighted the municipal government as the most relevant actor, as well as the fact that there is currently a disconnect between the actors.

Both groups spoke harshly about the need for government support and investment. They cited their current situation as 'frustrating' and coming with 'red tape', as the government gives misdirected financing and little organizational support. However, two youth subjects pointed out that locals should take some responsibility, referencing the lack of motivation for youth to stick around to make changes. This sentiment is backed by many in rural areas who often await state support instead of acting themselves (Kastenholz, Paço & Nave, 2023). This cycle could be combatted by providing leadership and autonomy opportunities to youth via skill building exercises and mentorship activities. With these skills in place, youth might feel more agency and establish entrepreneurial ventures in the region or take cultural preservation and promotion into their own hands, achieving a truly regenerative practice via co-creative tourism (Dredge, 2022).

Currently, youth are not getting paid, or getting paid very little, for their involvement in tourist activities. This is a limiting factor to their extended participation, especially as they age. An increase in tourism receipts and a decrease in seasonality would strengthen the economy of Miranda do Douro, thus creating jobs and encouraging youth to stay in the region. Besides, jobs related to co-creative tourism, a growing economy leads to the creation of a wide range of job opportunities. By adding a tourism market, the potential for economic advancement is high.

Logistically, the challenges presented by the subjects match up with logistical challenges in many small towns and rural communities, such as lack of transportation, time constraints, and funding. These can be minimized by reconfiguring existing infrastructure. For example, to alleviate time constraints for older youth, co-creative tourism activities could be geared to youth aged 15-17 avoiding the logistical challenges that many university-going and working youth face. This could also promote early feelings of place attachment as mentioned by one youth subject.

They [young kids] don't know the culture. But some people believe that it's reaching out from kids from an early age that they will start getting interested in on things (youth subject, male).

4.2.5 Impacts: What are the projected outcomes of youth participation?

According to those interviewed, the benefits to local youth participation in co-creative tourism activities were vast, crossing the cultural, economic, and social spheres, as well as applying to all peoples involved: local, tourist, and greater community. As one adult stakeholder subject put it, participation, and therefore impacts, are "A three-way street: the organization, participant and the community" (male). The full list of impacts can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. Perceived impacts of youth participation in co-creative tourism activities

Impacts	Stakeholders	Both	Youth
Benefits	Travel opportunities	Cultural preservation & promotion	Cooperation
	Place attachment	Skill building	Cultural exchange
	Socialization	Rewarding experiences	Non-formal education & knowledge building
	Increased tourism receipts	Community building	Job Creation
		Economic revitalization	
Negative Consequences	Too much emphasis on one cultural element	Inability to modernize	Inequitable distribution
			Stagnation

Source: Authors' Elaboration

Besides cultural preservation: sustainable development, regeneration and modernization were important benefits for both youth and stakeholders. Economically, co-creative tourism activities were said to bring financial compensation and an increase in tourism receipts. And socially, youth looked forward to relevant skill-building opportunities, while stakeholders cited travel possibilities and an increase in attitudes of place attachment and community building. However, such co-creative activities must be engaging, as youth expect hands-on, interactive experiences

working alongside experts who can teach skills of leadership and communication. This would help create a renewed sense of identity for youth as they help take ownership of their culture and share it with the incoming tourists.

One impact cited frequently by youth was the opportunity for skill building, which would give them a necessary avenue to learn vital skills needed for their future. One youth subject included that co-creative activities are an opportunity to teach various skills to all members of the community, ultimately leading to a more skilled community overall. While his reference was to practical skills, such as cooking, soft skills would be developed in the process too. Skills such as intercultural and intergenerational communication, creativity, decision making, empowerment, and teamwork, among others. Even practical skills in marketing and business management would be useful. And thus, with a more skilled community base and a growing economy, the development of the region would continue to progress, reaching new limits of potential.

> They [the community] can have more experienced people with a wider range of skill sets. The more people that come to these activities, the more people they have in their region with a wider variety of skills… Like a more skilled community I guess (youth subject, male).

Most practically, the economic potential of co-creative tourism is vast. And in a community with an ageing population, with few economic prospects, this is extremely vital to its continued survival, not only as a town, but for the heritage currently being preserved by the few community members left. Youth subjects pointed to the fact that Miranda do Douro 'still exists because of tourism' and this is a dangerous position to be in. Diversification is necessary as relying too heavily on tourism could be catastrophic, as was seen during the Covid-19 pandemic. The region could start diversification with co-creative tourism activities and, with its success, expand to creative activities in general, transforming the community into a cultural and creative hub for the region (like Loulé, or Caldas da Rainha, Portugal). The potential for economic success is boundless, with the ideal being decreased levels of rural exodus and increased cultural preservation efforts.

> I think some people will be interested in [co-creative tourism activities] because, like me, I know lots of people that really love to share our culture. I think if those opportunities appear some young people, young entrepreneurs and people that like to

share our culture, would take that opportunity and make the most of it (youth subject, male).

4.3 Strategies for Success

As a practical element to this theoretical, exploratory research analysis, both key strategies and additional strategies, are proposed to ensure the successful motivation and implementation of youth participation in co-creative tourism activities.

Ultimately, tourism can only go so far for sustainable development, hence why practitioners have started referring to regeneration instead. While not every negative effect of rural exodus can be overturned by implementing these strategies, the hope is that it can reduce the effects and create some opportunities. If coupled with other sustainable and regenerative practices, small towns and rural communities could truly achieve their cultural, social, and economic goals.

4.3.1 Key Strategies

The benchmarking analysis was a preliminary look into youth involvement in tourism activities. While the organizations analysed did not work in co-creative tourism, the best practices, critical success factors, and deficiencies of those organizations did provide some strategies to ensure youth participation in tourism was successful. These strategies helped guide the formulations of the interview questions for the youth and adult stakeholder semi-structured interviews as they were deemed relevant to apply to co-creative tourism activities as well. Therefore, by matching the strategies that emerged from the benchmarking analysis with similar strategies from the case study analysis, five key strategies for successful implementation of youth involved co-creative activities emerged based on organizational, adult stakeholder and youth input:

1. Peer influence
2. **Mentorship**
3. **Partnership and networks**
4. Youth helping youth
5. Opportunities for autonomy

Using these five strategies in tandem, small towns and rural communities will have a greater likelihood of success in motivating and implementing youth involvement in co-creative tourism activities.

Both mentorship and stakeholder partnerships were discussed in detail by the stakeholder and youth subjects, aligning as well with the critical success factors identified in the benchmarking. Thus, those strategies are particularly vital early in the implementation of co-creative tourism activities.

4.3.2 Additional Strategies

The additional strategies detailed in Table 5 are proposed strategies to be used alongside the key strategies. Unlike the key strategies, these strategies do not need to be used in tandem, practitioners can choose what best suits their needs.

Table 5. Additional strategies for success - How to ensure successful youth participation in co-creative tourism activities to promote sustainable development in small towns and rural communities

Factor	Strategy	Description
Motivation	Early engagement	Start participation in cultural and co-creative activities young by incorporating it into the school curriculum, or as an extracurricular activity after school.
	Peer influence	Encourage groups of friends to join cultural activities together and/or help to establish bonds between participants early to reinforce their desire to return.
	Mentorship opportunities	Youth with youth, adults with youth, stakeholders with youth to inspire each other, create lasting bonds, and learn important skills about teamwork and communication (including intergenerational communication).
	Skill building opportunities	Formal workshops on communication, leadership, responsibility, empowerment & autonomy, and informal chances to practice these skills.
	Technology implementation	Use technology for promotion via social media outlets, while also implementing technology into activities. Use youth knowledge for cooperation opportunities and advancement.
	Social justice promotion	Emphasize co-creative activities as preserving culture and boosting the economy, thus establishing sustainable development in the region.

Successful Implementation	Partnerships & networks	Create partnerships and build networks with comparable associations and organizations who share similar goals. Meet regularly to share ideas and support each other.
	Connect culture with history to reinforce place attachment	Teach youth the story of their region and people alongside cultural activities to promote a sense of identity.
	Experiment with co-creation	Take advantage of pre-existing cultural activities and practice co-creation by extending the 'moments' of tourist interaction.
	Guided support promoting youth agency	Give youth autonomy and agency, while also giving them the tools to succeed via facilitation. Youth autonomy can be achieved by including them in the planning, formation, and implementation processes of co-creative activities.
	Promotion to new tourism demographic - the cultural tourists	While maintaining the *day-tripper* demographic, appeal to cultural tourists via targeted promotion of existing cultural events in the off-season and facilitating the creation of homestay options as an alternative accommodation.
	Practice genuine and meaningful follow-up procedures	Both short and long-term activities should see facilitator follow-up, giving youth opportunities for continued engagement and knowledge reinforcement, and to secure social bonds.
	Establish a space for youth to collaborate	Provide a safe space where youth of all genders and ages can work and engage with one another.
	Provide non-formal, engaging learning experiences	Youth interaction with culture outside of traditional education settings and using non-traditional methods, such as tactile and kinaesthetic methods.
	For occasional activities, centralize them – geographically & timing	Offer in centralized locations, accessible by public transportation (school, local organizations). Plan the activities for after school on weekdays to decrease logistical constraints.
	Extended activities spread throughout region	Create opportunities for co-creation multiple days in a row to increase length of stay of tourists and deepen engagement for youth. Offer activities throughout the region, highlighting villages and peripheral spaces. Provide transportation options for youth.
	Differentiate activities	To avoid stagnation and increase repeated tourist participation, keep activities updated, modern, and encompassing a wide range of creative skills.

Source: Authors' Elaboration

4.4 Contributions, Limitations & Next Steps

4.4.1   Contributions

The major contribution of this work was adding the perspective of the forgotten demographic – youth. As youths are often a forgotten element of the sustainable development debate (Jaafar et al., 2015), and even more so, a forgotten demographic of study in academic research (Canosa et al., 2017), this study gives voice to young people in connection to sustainable development and co-creative tourism. By analysing both local adult stakeholders and youth from Miranda do Douro, the inputs of youth were highlighted, as well as showcasing the differences between what youth consider relevant compared to their adult counterparts.

The analysis also resulted in practical contributions for tourism enterprises and organizations working in youth and sustainable development. These entities can use the proposed strategies for success to ensure youth participation and sustainable cultural, social, and economic development.

4.4.2   Limitations

Limitations of this study included language barriers, limited sample size, limited scope of the sample group, lack of documented examples of youth involvement in tourism activities, and challenges in communication with relevant stakeholders. These limitations influenced the results of the study as only a subset of local youth, primarily male with plans for higher education, were interviewed.

Despite the limited impact of the study, the theoretical contribution shouldn't be overlooked as it opens the discussion for further analysis of youth involvement in co-creative activities to help achieve sustainable rural development.

4.4.3   Next Steps

As an exploratory research analysis, it is clear there is much more to uncover from the youth's perspective on their role in using co-creative tourism for the sustainable development agenda. Some further research avenues include:

i.   Interviewing younger youth (ages 13 and below), a wider scope of stakeholders, more diverse and a larger number of subjects.

ii. Comparing results from the wider scope of interview subjects.

iii. Implement action and collaborative research methods to empower participants and promote regenerative practices, as well as give local youth autonomy in creating co-creative tourism activities.

iv. Analyze tourism market potential for Miranda do Douro, including market segments, understanding if co-creative tourism is economically viable.

v. Analyze impact of co-creative tourism activities in Miranda do Douro, especially regarding cultural preservation, skill building, and rural exodus.

vi. Investigate the same topic in another region or country, comparing results with different cultural and geographical backgrounds.

The logical next steps in this analysis would be two-fold. First, to follow-up with current interview subjects sharing the results from the other subject groups to showcase disconnect between youth and stakeholders. Afterward, by organizing focus groups mixing subject groups, similar questions could be raised, noting the similarities and differences between both analyses. And second, implement a pilot program by using the key strategies and some additional strategies with youth and co-creation to observe if it makes an impact.

5. Conclusion

This study, which used a qualitative, exploratory approach using benchmarking and content analysis of semi-structured interviews of adult stakeholders and youth from a case study community, validated that youth should be encouraged to participate in co-creative tourism activities as it will promote steps toward sustainable development in small towns and rural communities. This study presented practical strategies to support organizations wanting to increase, or start youth participation, including methods to motivate youth and ensure the success of their participation in co-creative activities.

With these strategies in place, phases of sustainable development in the cultural, social, and economic spheres could be achieved. However, without defined partnerships, sincere government support and job creation, youth would continue to emigrate outside of the region, continuing the negative effects of rural exodus, such as cultural loss. Therefore, emphasis on network-building and government funding is needed, or the regenerative potential of local youth participation in co-creative tourism could be lost.

The benchmarking analysis established the need for organizations working in youth and tourism to provide non-formal learning experiences with hands-on activities and to emphasize practical skills applicable for the future. It was determined that organizations should empower youth by teaching autonomy, providing sincere follow-up to activities, dedicating a space safe for youth of all ages and genders, and establishing networks to ensure youth participation. Hence leading to meaningful interactions and promoting wider community development.

Within the case study, both local youth and adult stakeholders agreed that regional cultural heritage is unique and important, and efforts should be made to preserve it. Youth are well-versed in the cultural offering in the region and both groups believe that co-creative tourism could be used to showcase it to tourists and preserve it. This motivates both groups to participate in such activities. Stakeholders emphasize that youth need peer influence and community buy-in for motivation, while youth reference engaging and excited facilitators and the sharing of responsibility as major motivators. To support their participation, technology, group work, and mentorship are key. Stakeholders understand that recent repatriation has supported the increase of youth participation numbers, but the inevitable rural exodus due to lack of higher education in the region and limited opportunities counteracts any progress that had been made. Other barriers include logistical challenges such as transportation, time constraints, proximity, and lack of funding. Stakeholders expressed dissatisfaction in the lack of partnerships and networks supporting youth, and both groups were dissatisfied with the role of the local municipality - citing the need for an increased and directed level of support.

The benefits to local youth participation were vast, crossing the cultural, economic, and social spheres. Besides cultural preservation, sustainable development, regeneration, and modernization were important benefits for both youth and stakeholders. Economically, co-creative tourism activities bring financial compensation and an increase in tourism receipts. It creates opportunities for older artisans to showcase their craft and youth to establish tourism start-ups. Socially, youth looked forward to relevant skill building opportunities, while stakeholders cited travel possibilities and an increase in attitudes of place attachment, community building, and collaboration. However, such co-creative activities must be engaging, as youth expect hands-on, interactive experiences working alongside experts who can teach skills of leadership and communication. This helps create a renewed sense of identity for youth as they help take ownership of their culture and share it with tourists.

Ultimately, this study found that local youth have a similar impact on sustainable development as adult community members, though there is a disconnect between groups, as well as

government entities. It gave voice to young people by documenting an otherwise undocumented segment in tourism and provided practical strategies for rural communities to implement to achieve steps in sustainable development. With youth participation in co-creative tourism activities, steps toward cultural preservation could be achieved, skill building opportunities would be established, and the negative effects of rural exodus on small towns and rural communities could be diminished.

Acknowledgements

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