

Impact of creative event experiences on the intention to revisit peripheral cross-border destinations: the smuggling festival

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to analyse whether the experience of creative tourism – in terms of satisfaction, authenticity and memorability – in peripheral regions with shared intangible heritage plays a significant role in the decision to revisit border tourism destinations. Specifically, the study explores tourist experience in the Smuggling Festival held in the cross-border region of Sanlúcar de Guadiana (Spain) and Alcoutim (Portugal) in March.

Design/methodology/approach – A partial least squares structural equation model (PLS-SEM) is used for data analysis because it is an appropriate technique for exploring the relationships between authenticity, satisfaction and intention to revisit peripheral, cross-border destinations.

Findings – The results indicate that satisfaction with the Smuggling Festival and its authenticity are significant variables in the decision to revisit a cross-border and peripheral destination based on a memorable creative tourism experience. The present study indicates that creative experience, through perceived satisfaction, has a significant impact on the intention to revisit the border destination.

Practical implications – This study contributes to provide useful information to tourism agents and local administrations for better tourism and economic management of festivals in border areas. The findings help service providers to design specific and truly unforgettable experiences for tourists, encouraging repeat visits through satisfaction with the experience in the chosen destination.

Originality/value – This research contributes to creative tourism strategies for peripheral areas, supporting trend detection in border festival management and forming a basis for regional growth strategies in rural, depopulated regions. Its novelty lies in the fact that it focuses on a specific festival (the Smuggling Festival) in a poorly explored cross-border context.

Keywords Border tourism, Smuggling festival, Creative tourism experience, Satisfaction, Intention to revisit
Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Border tourism has greatly benefited from the development and definition of the concept of intangible heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) since the 1980s. This has enabled the classification of multiple elements, from the natural environment to manufacturing methods, architectural techniques and culinary and craft customs, as essential components of global heritage (Mahadevan and Zhang, 2022). In many rural regions, tourism is understood as a vehicle for regional progress and development (Stoffelen and Vanneste, 2015). Elements of intangible heritage are both social expressions of a place's identity and touristic assets, having an impact on visitors' memory of place.

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Significant changes in tourist flows triggered by recent advances in information technologies and infrastructures ([Azmi et al., 2023](#)), together with international initiatives such as the Schengen Agreement, which has eliminated barriers between 27 European nations, have encouraged tourism managers in border destinations to develop distinctive promotion strategies ([Semone and Kozak, 2012](#)). However, although the demand for and supply of cross-border destinations in North America and Europe are on the rise ([Blasco et al., 2014](#); [Kozak and Buhalis, 2019](#)), there is still a dearth of both theoretical and practical research studies on border regions. This is especially the case in peripheral areas whose touristic appeal largely relies on landscape and distance from urban environments ([Makkonen and Williams, 2024](#); [Maldonado-López et al., 2024a](#); [Thornton et al., 2018](#)).

The redefinition of European political boundaries has been a major factor in the revitalization and development of the southern cross-border regions between Spain and Portugal ([Godinho, 2014](#)). This has involved the creation of new creative tourism experiences ([Hung et al., 2016](#); [Suhartanto et al., 2020](#); [Wei et al., 2023](#)), such as the Smuggling Festival held in Alcoutim and Sanlúcar de Guadiana (on which this study focuses). The Smuggling Festival has been developed in recent years by the Tourism Service of the Alcoutim Town Council in order to set up a joint cross-border tourism strategy with the nearby municipality of Sanlúcar de Guadiana. The Smuggling Festival was held for the first time in 2017, and after four editions (2017, 2018, 2019 and 2023), it has now become a periodic event. After the celebration of the 2023 edition, the organisation of The Smuggling Festival decided to hold this event biennially, so the next edition will be held in 2025. The festival has greatly benefitted from its uniqueness and timing, promoting and valorising the region's historical memory and heritage and helping the communities involved to create a well-defined and highly competitive brand ([Cardoso and López, 2023](#); [Devkota et al., 2023](#)). The cross-border area under study includes two municipalities of under 1,100 inhabitants, where public and private tourism stakeholders are local residents ([Hernández Ramírez, 2017](#)). These stakeholders play a central role in the creation of innovative tourism experiences which also meet the criteria to attract European Union (EU) funding and have a significant media presence ([Merrilees et al., 2012](#)).

According to the latest press release issued by the National Statistics Institute, as of 22 December 2023, the turnover of the Spanish tourism sector was 155,946 m euros in 2022, 11.6% of the Spanish GDP, that is, 3.9% more than in 2021. The tourism industry employed 1.9 m people, 9.3% of all jobs. This translates into the creation of approximately 2.27 m jobs ([INE, 2023](#)). For its part, Portugal has been one of the fastest destinations to recover pre-pandemic levels of international visitors. In 2022, the tourist sector in Portugal grew by 20.7%, accounting for 7.1% of the national GDP ([Statistics Portugal, 2022](#)). In 2023, the Portuguese tourist sector employed roughly 423,300 people, up from 386,480 in the previous year. In addition, there were around 86,000 tourism-related companies operating in Portugal ([Statistics Portugal, 2023](#)). In this context, small towns want a share of this economic growth, which is perceived as a solution to stop depopulation in Spain and Portugal. According to the Spanish Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (2020), there are 6,815 municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants in Spain, 80% of which lose population annually. In turn, over 37% of Portuguese municipalities have less than 10,000 inhabitants ([Statistics Portugal, 2023](#)). The municipalities under study are in a region with high depopulation rates and a shrinking economy.

According to projections made by the [OECD \(2022\)](#), by 2075 Portugal will have the highest old-age to working-age ratio – that is, the number of people aged 65 and over for every 100 people in working age (between 20 and 64) – in the world (70.6%), and Spain will be in fourth place (70.4%), after Japan and Greece. On the Spanish side, Sanlúcar de Guadiana has a population density of under 8.1 inhabitants per km², defined as a very low population density area by Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union ([EUR-LEX, 2012](#)). The same applies to Alcoutim, whose population density is even lower than 8.1 inhabitants per km², so it can be said that both municipalities have similar demographic characteristics.

Given the challenges faced by peripheral regions, creative tourism focusing on intangible heritage has been identified as a key tool to develop depopulating regions (Hernández-León, 2023; Chen *et al.*, 2023). International borders and their constituent territories are recognized as attractive tourist destinations (Timothy, 2001). The term “border” includes both the legal demarcation between states and signifiers of differentiation where cultures and politics engage in a dynamic relationship (Stoffelen, 2024). Geopolitical borders are not static, and it is necessary to understand the processes through which they are constructed and reconstructed, which must be historically legitimized to be widely accepted (Więckowski, 2023). Shared memories suggest joint origins and cultural traits, which in turn legitimize the identity of common borders, the invocation of the past and the invention of tradition in the name of present and future interests (Weidenfeld *et al.*, 2013).

Generally speaking, borders and boundaries are an understudied factor of tourist mobility (Bianchi *et al.*, 2020). A better understanding of this factor, however, is critical, especially owing to the globalized nature of contemporary tourism flows and the varying degrees of permeability of borders, which directly affect tourism mobility (Cappellano *et al.*, 2022; Vasanícova *et al.*, 2022). EU border regions have become prime candidates for the development of border tourism and the selection of a particular shared heritage can be indicative of the development of joint identities in cross-border areas (Huang *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, this study aims to analyse the extent to which the experience of cross-border creative tourism – in terms of satisfaction of participants, authenticity and ability to make the experience memorable and recommendable – plays a role in the subsequent behaviour of tourists; in helping to consolidate creative tourism experiences in peripheral tourist destinations; and, ultimately, in contributing to mitigate depopulation.

Recent studies have mainly focused on urban and non-border regions, while peripheral regions facing depopulation have been paid less attention (Novais *et al.*, 2024; Skandalis *et al.*, 2024). As such, this work is meant to help plug this research gap by contributing to the literature on border tourism, particularly concerning the impact of creative tourism strategies on regional development. It also aims to vindicate an underexplored framework that considers creative tourism, authenticity, memorability, satisfaction and intention to revisit in peripheral cross-border contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Experiences of creative, cross-border tourism*

Traditionally, the dominant model of tourism involved tourists visiting a major destination in a single country for a maximum stay of two weeks (Kozak and Buhalis, 2019). The preferred destinations tend to be large, overcrowded capitals that, in many cases, end up suffocating the tourist. This has caused tourists to move towards new and more authentic destinations where they can connect more directly with the environment that surrounds them and enjoy unique and shorter experiences, allowing them to visit more than one destination in a single trip (Kozak and Baloglu, 2010).

In this way, a new concept of tourism, which offers a wide diversity of tourists the possibility of finding their own preferred touristic experience, is currently crystallising (Belas *et al.*, 2020). Creative tourism emerges as a new strategy to distinguish small towns from large tourist cities, especially if the creative activity is shared by two local destinations, increasing their joint leverage vis-à-vis large operators (Tosun *et al.*, 2005).

The concept of creative tourism emerged in the 2000s. Richards and Wilson (2006) defined it as opportunities offered to visitors to actively participate in experiences specific to the city they were visiting. Creative tourism experiences are a new form of tourism that combines different creative elements and lifestyles, transforming cultural references (instruments, traditions, memories or territories) into elements of intangible heritage. These can be turned into social and economic assets with the deployment of the right promotion strategies (Silva, 2009).

Different studies on creative tourism can be found in the literature. [Ali et al. \(2016\)](#), for instance, conduct a study on tourists' satisfaction and memorability for various creative activities, such as cooking classes, handicrafts and storytelling, in Malaysia; [Hung et al. \(2016\)](#) examine similar variables concerning pottery-making in Yingge (Taiwan) and [Dean and Suhartanto \(2019\)](#) consider push-pull factors for activities such as gardening, horse riding and batik painting in Indonesia. Other studies on creative tourism focus on other factors, such as loyalty ([Suhartanto et al., 2020](#)) and intention to revisit ([Liu, 2020](#)). Other studies consider alternative variables, such as self-congruence ([Shahabi et al., 2022](#)) and the related variable destination attachment ([Wei et al., 2023](#)) as well as creativity, inspiration, self-improvement and the need to disconnect ([Wei et al., 2023; Zhang and Xie, 2019](#)).

Additionally, [Remoaldo et al. \(2020\)](#) divide profiles based on the motivation of different creative tourism projects in Portugal, and [Chan et al. \(2022\)](#) determine the factors that drive visitors to Hong Kong's Police Married Quarters (a space dedicated to art and design) around the concept of the four Es: education, aesthetics, entertainment and escape. Also, [Li and Kovacs \(2022\)](#) analyse travel blogs in Chinese creative cities, while [De Bruin and Jelinčić \(2016\)](#) examine the different concepts of creative tourism from a theoretical perspective.

With regard to cross-border tourism activities, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization ([UNWTO, 2018](#)), the following conditions need to be met: for tourist facilities to straddle the border; for means, such as visas or passports, to allow tourists to move between destinations, to be made available; for flexible and frequent means of transport to move across the border to be made available; for information to be made available using information technologies; for a variety of experiences to be made available; for the different areas involved to cooperate taking care of the environment; for tourists to be given the possibility of creating content for their social networks; for the different areas involved to share a common historical past; the active participation of local residents and political stability and coordination of organisational structures.

Many academic studies have addressed the issue of cross-border tourism, most of which feature in [Salouw et al.'s \(2023\)](#) bibliometric study. [Kozak and Buhalis \(2019\)](#) argue that both sides (in this instance Greece and Turkey) can benefit from a successful marketing strategy, increasing their competitiveness and helping them solve their economic, social and political issues.

[Orgaz-Agüera and Moral-Cuadra \(2022\)](#) stress souvenirs, food, experiences and facilities on the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, arguing that improved visitor satisfaction can help local stakeholders to better run their businesses. For their part, [Ferrer-Roca et al. \(2022\)](#) focus on the Sustainable Development Goals partnership in the Cerdanya Valley, shared by Spain and France, emphasising the importance of a sustainable management of the cross-border destination and the need for close institutional cooperation across the border.

In addition, [Makkonen et al. \(2018\)](#) analyse tourism-related collaboration between Finland and Russia, based on EU cooperation funds, emphasising the need to narrow the wide cultural and social differences in the region. [Stoffelen \(2018\)](#) examines the Vennbahn cycling route through Germany, Belgium and Luxemburg, arguing that it can be a useful instrument for "soft" region-building and a shared mindset between the stakeholders involved. Finally, [Studzieniecki et al. \(2023\)](#) adopt a literature review/theoretical perspective to analyse the Lithuanian/Polish border, considering the development of a Tourist Cross-Border Functional Area.

2.2 The Smuggling Festival

Although the Treaty of Alcañices of 1,297 is generally accepted to have fixed the border between Castile and Portugal, numerous conflicts over the position of boundary markers, defensive buildings and the distribution of grazeland persisted until the 19th century ([Trillo-Santamaría and Paül, 2014](#)). This study focuses on a border region in the southern Iberian

Peninsula, originally studied by [Hernández et al. \(1999\)](#) and [Uriarte \(1994\)](#) as a marginal, depressed and isolated border region with no direct communication infrastructures with central regions and unclear boundaries until well into the 20th century. For these reasons, the character of population centres, and their mutual socio-cultural interaction, are clearly marked by the border, which is eminently permeable, a crucial aspect for the focus of this study. This area is thus defined by the notion of border culture developed to examine the specific features of Spanish-Portuguese border regions ([Marcos, 2023](#)); the border between Portugal and Spain is the oldest European frontier ([Kavanagh, 2011](#); [Viegas et al., 2023](#)). Smuggling across this border was widespread until 1986, when Portugal and Spain joined the European Economic Community (now the EU), and this has recently inspired tourist initiatives to revitalise the region's cross-border heritage. The Smuggling Festival takes place in two eminently border towns, Sanlúcar de Guadiana on the western border of the province of Huelva (Spain) and Alcoutim, a municipality in the Faro district, in the Algarve region (Portugal). The festival also involves other towns that, although close to the border, are less heavily influenced by it. ([Jurado Almonte, 2014](#)).

The Smuggling Festival was held for the first time in 2017. A year earlier, the proposal was submitted, approved and funded by the Portuguese programme “tourism 365” ([Turismo do Algarve, 2017](#)), which aims to promote joint tourism initiatives in Algarve-Andalusia, the neighbouring Portuguese and Spanish regions. Sanlúcar de Guadiana has also received funding to promote the “unique Iberian border brand” described by [Maldonado-López et al. \(2024a\)](#) in their study on the factors that define the image of the cross-border region of Sanlúcar de Guadiana (Spain) and Alcoutim (Portugal) as a tourist destination.

This festival, which has been held every two years since its latest edition in 2023, combines the colours, flavours and aromas of gastronomy with the sounds of traditional music ([Sanlúcar de Guadiana Town Council, 2024](#)). The smuggling festival brings to life stories of the past in which the Guadiana becomes a loyal accomplice and facilitator of the transport of prohibited products. The festival is celebrated in the last week of March, and it uses the cross-border theme to look to the past but also to the common challenges that unite Alcoutim and Sanlúcar de Guadiana for the future. To this end, an extensive programme of gastronomic activities, parades, street theatre, music, crafts, sports and much more is on offer. The programme combines fun activities while recreating the atmosphere, lifestyles and customs of those smuggling years ([Interreg Spain-Portugal, 2023](#)). The most outstanding activities held in both municipalities include the following ([Agenda de Huelva, 2023](#)); (a) Historical reenactment of smuggling by local actors (see [Figure 1](#)), particularly the transport of goods such as coffee and tobacco across the Guadiana River. These re-enactments not only recall a past practice but also “reinforce the visitor's emotional connection to the region's history” ([Fu et al., 2018](#)); (b) Craft and food markets featuring traditional products such as embroidery, pottery and local specialities. According to [Zheng et al. \(2023\)](#), gastronomy and local crafts are key elements in the tourists' perception of authenticity; (c) Interactive workshops (see [Figure 2](#)) where activities such as net-weaving and other crafts allow visitors to participate directly in local traditions. This aligns with the principles of creative tourism, which prioritise “the co-creation of cultural experiences” ([Campos et al., 2023](#)); (d) Floating footbridge, a temporary bridge between Sanlúcar and Alcoutim, which symbolises cross-border cooperation and allows visitors to freely explore both sides of the border and (e) Artistic performances, including concerts of Portuguese fado, Andalusian flamenco and other traditional music genres in the region (see [Figure 3](#)) and (f) Activities on the river, including boat rides and canoeing, which highlight the natural beauty of the region and promote sustainable tourism ([Zheng et al., 2023](#)).

In this context, the Festival, which evokes the former importance of smuggling practices, creates the perfect setting to materialise the dispersed memories that make up the local cross-border identity ([López, 2023](#)), while fulfilling the generations-long longing to build a bridge to unite the two shores of the Guadiana River during the event ([Figure 4](#)).

The smuggling festival recreates past stories through music, plays, food and traditional crafts. The Guadiana River is one of the main attractions, as the physical element that separates



Figure 1. Historical re-enactment of smuggling. Source: Authors' own work



Figure 2. Interactive ceramic workshop in the smuggling festival. Source: [Câmara de Alcútem \(2023\)](#)

Spain and Portugal, featuring as a loyal accomplice and facilitator of contraband in forbidden goods, after having stood as a political and administrative barrier for centuries. The recreation of cross-border experiences keeps alive shared identity and community features and their associated symbolic and emotional references ([García Fernández et al., 2017](#)).

2.3 Hypotheses and proposed model

Authenticity is key for creative tourism. [Wu et al. \(2022\)](#) point out that many traditional Chinese cities have managed to row back from a previous loss of authenticity, helping them to revitalise their economy. Some case studies have noted that authenticity doubles the appeal of some touristic destinations (in terms of visitor numbers), for instance, in Soweto (South Africa) ([Mkhize and Ivanovic, 2019](#)). [Liu \(2020\)](#) confirms the relationship between authenticity and intention to revisit. Authenticity also increases the will of visitors to take



Figure 3. Music performances in the smuggling festival. Source: [Câmara de Alcouthim \(2023\)](#)



Figure 4. Cross-border bridge built to ford the Guadiana. Source: Authors' own work

part in creative activities ([Zhang and Xie, 2019](#)). In addition, the influence of direct involvement and hands-on experience has been found to play a decisive role on perceived authenticity ([Wang et al., 2020](#); [Zatori et al., 2018](#)). Both interactional and emotional authenticity influence perceived value ([Kabra and Singh, 2023](#)), although [Ruan et al. \(2021\)](#) argue that authenticity only has a moderate effect on the enjoyment derived from cultural and creative tourism.

Most of the existing literature on authenticity finds that creative-food tourism experience is closely related to authenticity, which is also strongly linked with satisfaction ([Gómez-Rico et al., 2022](#)). Also, considering the effect that Internet celebrities' short videos have on the public appeal of certain destination, [Wu and Lai \(2024\)](#) found that authenticity has a stronger impact on emotions than creativity.

[Ali et al. \(2016\)](#) report that creative tourism leads to authentic, memorable and satisfying experiences. In a similar vein, [Hung et al. \(2016\)](#) argue for a link between creative experiences

and memorability, resulting in greater willingness to revisit. Similar studies address such aspects as the quality of experience and its relationship with the intention to return, satisfaction (Dean and Suhartanto, 2019) and loyalty (Suhartanto *et al.*, 2020). Shahabi *et al.* (2022) examine the relationship between experience and other factors, such as perceived enjoyment and self-improvement. Other issues taken into account in the literature include creative atmosphere, inspiration and attachment to destinations (Wei *et al.*, 2023).

The literature on creative tourism suggests that creative experiences positively influence memorability (Rachão *et al.*, 2021), which means that memorability and behaviour – e.g. intention to revisit (Hung *et al.*, 2016; Molina-Collado *et al.*, 2024) – are strongly related (Sthapit *et al.*, 2020). In addition, Ali *et al.* (2016) confirm the influence of the memorability of creative tourism on tourist satisfaction. Finally, several studies corroborate that a satisfactory experience affects consumer behaviour (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Astor *et al.*, 2022; Luvsandavaajav *et al.*, 2022; Jiang *et al.*, 2023), loyalty (Suhartanto *et al.*, 2020; Sharma *et al.*, 2024), intention to revisit (Heydari Fard *et al.*, 2021) and willingness to pay (Rita *et al.*, 2024). As such, based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are put forward:

- H1. The authenticity of the experience significantly affects tourist behavioural intention.
- H2. The authenticity of the experience is a significant factor in satisfaction.
- H3. The creative tourism experience is a significant factor in the creation of authentic experiences.
- H4. Creative tourism experience significantly affects tourist behavioural intention.
- H5. The creative tourism experience is a significant factor in the creation of memorable experiences.
- H6. The creative tourism experience is a significant factor in the creation of fulfilling experiences.
- H7. Memorable experience significantly affects tourist behavioural intention.
- H8. Memorable experience is a significant factor in the creation of a successful experience.
- H9. Satisfactory experience significantly affects tourist behavioural intention.

The model used (Figure 5) intends to analyse how the creative tourism experience is related to behavioural intention, expressed as the willingness to visit the destination for the first time or revisiting it. The model also examines if this relationship changes when it is analysed in terms of tourist satisfaction, the authenticity of the destination and the memorability of the experience. Figure 2 illustrates the assumed relationships between hypotheses (H1 and H9), which will be analysed to confirm/reject and define the strength of these relationships.

3. Methodology

The hypotheses will be analysed to confirm/reject the relationships modelled in Figure 2 and define incidence between different combinations of variables using the PLS-SEM methodology, which is particularly suitable for research with small samples (Acosta *et al.*, 2018). PLS-SEM was chosen because of its ability to handle complex models involving multiple relationships between latent constructs, even with relatively small sample sizes. This approach is particularly suitable when the primary goal is to maximise predictions and explore emergent relationships, rather than confirming established theories (Hair *et al.*, 2019). In this study, PLS-SEM allows the modelling of constructs such as authenticity, memorability and visitor satisfaction, which are latent and not directly observable variables, while controlling for collinearity between indicators (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2022). In addition, the use of PLS-SEM is also widespread in the literature that deals with the issue at hand (Liu, 2020; Orgaz-Agüera and

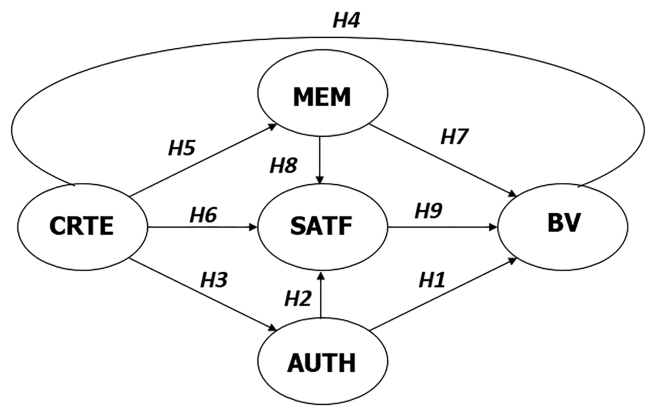


Figure 5. Proposed hypothesis model illustrating the relationships between creative tourism, authenticity, satisfaction and intention to revisit, CRTE: Creative tourism experience; SATF: Satisfaction; MEM: Memorability; AUTH: Authenticity and BV: Behavioural intention. Source: Authors’ own work

Moral-Cuadra, 2022; Suhartanto *et al.*, 2020; Wei *et al.*, 2023; Zhang and Xie, 2019). In this instance, SmartPLS 4 was used owing to its intuitive interface and its ability to calculate advanced metrics, such as spillover effects, which are essential for assessing the robustness of the model (Henseler *et al.*, 2018). The key variables of the study were measured using established and accepted scales in the creative tourism-related literature. The choice of these scales was based on their ability to accurately capture the relevant variables, such as creative tourism experience, satisfaction, memorability and authenticity. These scales measure core aspects of creative experiences, which fully aligns them with the aims of this study and ensure comparability with previous research. The variable authenticity was measured using six items taken from Zatori *et al.* (2018), satisfaction and behavioural intention were measured using two items each, taken from Ali *et al.* (2016) and Hosany and Witham (2010), the creative tourism experience variable was measured using six items adapted from Ali *et al.* (2016), in terms of the avoidance and recognition factor and the memorability variable was measured using three items taken from Zatori *et al.* (2018). A seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree” was used to structure the responses.

The questions for each variable are presented in Table 1. The authenticity of the experience (AUTH) variable aims to determine the degree of authenticity by assessing the attributes that constitute and define the experience, making it stand out from similar activities; behavioural intention (BV) refers to consumer behaviour and the selection of creative tourism activities, such as the Smuggling Festival, to the detriment of other alternatives on offer in the tourism market; the creative tourism experience (CRTE) aims to make a general assessment of the creative tourism experience, evaluating intangible attributes of the festival that determine tourist experience; this instrument also measures visitor sensitivity, feelings and state of mind while they experience the festival; memorability of experience (MEM) aims to evaluate the ability of the creative tourism activity to leave a memorable mark on visitors, and whether this memory is positive or negative; finally, satisfaction with the experience (SATF) is assessed by contrasting visitors expectations and their level of satisfaction.

Data were collected through questionnaires administered on 24th, 25th and 26th March 2023, during the latest edition of the Smuggling Festival. To facilitate data collection, questions were read to the visitors on their way to creative tourism activities (Bello Acebron *et al.*, 2005). The aim of this survey was to measure the intention to revisit the target tourist destination, based on the participation in a creative tourism experience. According to the Mayor of Sanlúcar de Guadiana: “The activities are programmed so that on both sides of the

Table 1. List of questions grouped by variables of the questionnaire

Variable	Definition or content of the question in the questionnaire
AUTH1	Most of the sites of interest at the Smuggling Festival are genuine
AUTH2	The Smuggling Festival is a good reflection of local life and culture
AUTH3	My experience at the Smuggling Festival felt authentic
AUTH4	I have experienced something that I can relate to during the Smuggling Festival
AUTH5	The Smuggling Festival has contributed to my personal development
AUTH6	I learned about myself during the Smuggling Festival
BV1	I intend to revisit the Smuggling Festival
BV2	I will recommend the Smuggling Festival to my friends and others
CRTE1	I feel that I relaxed during the Smuggling Festival
CRTE2	The Smuggling Festival made me forget my daily routine
CRTE3	I feel that I play a different role during the Smuggling Festival
CRTE4	The Smuggling Festival staff has helped me every time I needed it
CRTE5	My presence has been relevant throughout the Smuggling Festival
CRTE6	I have been treated courteously during the Smuggling Festival
CRTE7	Infrastructures and activities at the Smuggling Festival are comfortable
CRTE8	I felt relaxed at the Smuggling Festival
CRTE9	I felt safe during Smuggling Festival activities
CRTE10	My privacy was safeguarded during Smuggling Festival activities
CRTE11	I participated in something that suited my interests at the Smuggling Festival
CRTE12	I did something unique and memorable at the Smuggling Festival
CRTE13	I had a ‘once in a lifetime’ experience during the Smuggling Festival
CRTE14	I did something very new and different at the Smuggling Festival
CRTE15	I have been able to choose the activities and their results during the Smuggling Festival
CRTE16	The staff at the Smuggling Festival were friendly and engaging
CRTE17	The staff at the Smuggling Festival were well informed
CRTE18	The staff at the Smuggling Festival were able to control situations
CRTE19	The Smuggling Festival activities enhanced my skills
CRTE20	I learned a lot with Smuggling Festival activities
CRTE21	Smuggling Festival activities encouraged my curiosity to learn new things
CRTE22	The Smuggling Festival is a real learning experience
MEM1	I will remember a lot of positive things about the Smuggling Festival
MEM2	I will not forget my experience at the Smuggling Festival
MEM3	I have wonderful memories of the Smuggling Festival
SATF1	I am very satisfied with the Smuggling Festival
SATF2	I am very much looking forward to the next Smuggling Festival

Source(s): Authors’ own work

river there are interactive workshops of handicrafts from the period [that is being evoked], markets with traditional products, music, dancing, and travelling theatre groups. We also aim for the groups that we bring to have the chance to perform on different stages, in both municipalities” (Personal communication, 10/03/2023).

The sample was selected using a non-probabilistic sampling method during the celebration of the Smuggling Festival took place, in order to have roughly the same number of responses from both municipalities (Liao *et al.*, 2019; Maldonado-López *et al.*, 2024a). This sampling approach involves inequitable chances of selection among all potential participants, where the selection process is based on the researcher’s discretion. The use of this method is widespread in social science studies, where the diverse array of necessary characteristics requires the delineation of focused research avenues (Lehdonvirta *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the distribution of questionnaires was adapted to the context of the festival, ensuring the participation of respondents taking part in various activities on both sides of the Guadiana; 48.3% of the responses were collected in Sanlúcar de Guadiana and 51.7% in Alcutim. In addition, 83.7% of respondents had already crossed the border and 17.3% intended to do so. These results are in line with the data provided by Alcutim’s tourism

official, who stated, “Most of the visitors are attracted by the possibility of crossing the Guadiana border on foot, since it is only during these days that this possibility exists, so that the tourists live a truly cross-border experience and participate in the activities on both sides of the border” (Personal communication, 10.03.2002). However, this type of sampling strategy may limit the feasibility of extrapolating the results to other creative tourism events held in other borders. As such, further research is necessary to help consolidate the significance of the variables adopted in this work and apply them to other sociogeographic contexts. To mitigate potential sampling biases, a wave analysis (Ali *et al.*, 2016) was undertaken to establish whether there were significant differences in responses provided at different stages of the data collection process. Since this study relied on a single source for data collection, we also addressed the threat of common method bias (CMB). Following the recommendations of Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) to mitigate CMB, we implemented two different solutions: a procedural solution and a statistical solution. During the questionnaire design phase, we ensured that common rate effects, item characteristic effects, item priming effects, common scale format effects and scale length effects were avoided in the whole instrument. The questionnaire used in this research was based on previously validated instruments from similar studies, adapted to the specific context of creative tourism in peripheral areas. To ensure content validity, a panel of experts in tourism research evaluated the relevance and clarity of the items. Additionally, a pilot test was conducted with a small sample of participants ($n = 30$) during a creative cultural event held in the towns of Sanlúcar de Guadiana and Alcoutim, three weeks before the Smuggling Festival. This allowed us to identify and correct any ambiguities or unclear phrasing in the questions, ensuring the reliability and validity of the final instrument. Finally, in order to prevent measurement errors, this study employs statistical protocols described by Kock (2015), namely the introduction of a new latent variable as the dependent variable, with variance inflation factors (VIF) below 3.3.

The final 447 responses exceed the sample size requirements of (1) at least ten times the maximum number of formative indicators used to measure a single construct and (2) at least ten times the maximum number of structural pathways pointing to a single latent construct within the structural model (Chen and Ye, 2023). In addition, the GPower statistical package, a tool widely used in the social sciences (Mayukh and Al-Giffari, 2023), was used to confirm that the sample size reached an adequate level of representativeness (Maldonado-López *et al.*, 2024b).

The demographic profile of the respondents was 49.9% female and 50.1% male, ensuring gender equity. The sample was also selected to be representative in terms of age: 18.1% of respondents were between 18 and 25 years old; 32.5% between 26 and 40 years old; 20.4% between 41 and 50 years old; 20.3% between 51 and 60 years old and 8.7% over 60 years old (Zheng *et al.*, 2023).

4. Results

For data analysis, Smart-PLS 4 software was used (Ringle *et al.*, 2022). Prior to this, an initial assessment to ensure the reliability and validity of the measurement scales was undertaken, followed by an analysis of the structural model (Chin and Dibbern, 2010). This approach, which is widely accepted in academic literature, is particularly suitable for social sciences research involving small sample sizes (Chin, 1998). To evaluate variable reliability, we followed the guidelines put forth by Roldan and Cepeda (2017), which include the analysis of individual loads and Cronbach's alpha. Specifically, individual loadings must exceed 0.7, while the Alpha coefficient should be 0.8 or above (Ringle *et al.*, 2015). Both criteria are met, as shown in Table 2. Given the limitations of Cronbach's alpha, we also assessed composite reliability indicators, which are likewise above the acceptable value of 0.8 (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) was used to assess convergent validity, exceeding the suitable threshold of 0.5 (Ringle *et al.*, 2015).

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) criterion (results in Table 3) and cross-verified with the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio

Table 2. Scales and measurement model

Variables	External loads	AVE	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha
AUTH		0.877	0.880	0.910
AUTH1	0.835			
AUTH2	0.822			
AUTH3	0.795			
AUTH4	0.811			
AUTH5	0.825			
AUTH6	0.821			
BV		0.834	0.846	0.923
BV1	0.915			
BV2	0.937			
CRTE		0.789	0.799	0.851
CRTE1	0.787			
CRTE2	0.814			
CRTE3	0.954			
CRTE4	0.756			
CRTE5	0.830			
CRTE6	0.738			
CRTE7	0.762			
CRTE8	0.711			
CRTE9	0.892			
CRTE10	0.853			
CRTE11	0.730			
CRTE12	0.923			
CRTE13	0.861			
CRTE14	0.792			
CRTE15	0.731			
CRTE16	0.843			
CRTE17	0.815			
CRTE18	0.958			
CRTE19	0.892			
CRTE20	0.728			
CRTE21	0.766			
CRTE22	0.774			
MEM		0.745	0.843	0.882
MEM1	0.936			
MEM2	0.839			
MEM3	0.825			
SAFT		0.708	0.822	0.872
SAFT1	0.901			
SAFT2	0.856			

Source(s): Authors' own work**Table 3.** Assessment of the measurement model – discriminant validity: Fornell–Larcker criterion

	AUTH	BV	CRTE	MEM	SATF
AUTH	0.818				
BV	0.655	0.926			
CRTE	0.689	0.533	0.700		
MEM	0.679	0.638	0.685	0.889	
SATF	0.701	0.765	0.673	0.755	0.879

Source(s): Authors' own work

test (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2014), with all values falling below the suggested 0.9 threshold (see Table 4). The model fit was examined, and the root mean square residual (SRMR) was under 0.08, which, according to Manzano Patiño (2018), indicates a good fit (see Table 5).

The structural model assessment demonstrates the robustness of the relationship between the dependent and independent variables, as shown in Table 6. The hypothesis test shows significance (*p*-value) for seven of the nine possible relationships. The high *t*-values yielded by the H3 (“The creative tourism experience is a significant factor in the creation of authentic experiences”) and H5 (“The creative tourism experience is a significant factor in the creation of memorable experiences”) relationships, 10.419 and 14.183, respectively, suggest that providing authentic and memorable creative tourism experiences, revolving around non-seasonal products that emphasize shared history and intangible heritage, can effectively encourage visitors to engage in co-creative tourism activities. The Smuggling Festival offers tourists meaningful and unique experiences by allowing them to engage in firsthand

Table 4. Assessment of the measurement model – discriminant validity: heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)

	AUTH	BV	CRTE	MEM	SATF
AUTH					
BV	0.757				
CRTE	0.831	0.646			
MEM	0.795	0.761	0.846		
SATF	0.866	0.881	0.892	0.862	
Source(s): Authors’ own work					

Table 5. Fitted model

	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.079	0.079
Note(s): SRMR: root mean square residual		
Source(s): Authors’ own work		

Table 6. Contrast of the structural model (path coefficients)

Hypothesis		β	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	Confidence intervals 2.5% 97.5%		Supported
H1	AUTH → BV	0.247	2.581	0.010**	0.032	0.414	Yes
H2	AUTH → SATF	0.275	2.793	0.005***	0.082	0.476	Yes
H3	CRTE → AUTH	0.689	10.419	0.000***	0.548	0.806	Yes
H4	CRTE → BV	0.095	1.038	0.299	0.259	0.101	No
H5	CRTE → MEM	0.685	14.183	0.000***	0.586	0.777	Yes
H6	CRTE → SATF	0.178	2.153	0.031*	0.022	0.348	Yes
H7	MEM → BV	0.092	0.753	0.452	0.134	0.350	No
H8	MEM → SATF	0.447	5.218	0.000***	0.278	0.612	Yes
H9	SATF → BV	0.588	5.516	0.000***	0.382	0.802	Yes
Note(s): *** <i>p</i> < 0.001, ** <i>p</i> < 0.01 and * <i>p</i> < 0.05, ns: not significant (based n t (10,000), two-tailed test)							
Source(s): Authors’ own work							

experiences (Richards, 2011). The interactions generated by the festival's creative activities stand in stark contrast to the heavily congested coastal and cultural tourism destinations. In addition, concerning hypothesis H8, it was found that the memorability of the experience significantly affects the satisfaction of participants (t-value 5.218), which also has a significant effect on the visitors' intention to revisit (t-value 5.516). With regard to the variables that affect tourist satisfaction, the values yielded by hypotheses H6 (t-value 2.153) and H2 (t-value 2.793) indicates that the creative tourism experience as well as perception of authenticity positively affect tourist satisfaction.

This suggests that local agencies and residents should work to preserve genuine customs and traditions. To promote tourism destinations effectively, it is essential to harness this cultural potential and present it in a more innovative manner, fostering memorable and enduring experiences for visitors. The results corroborate that participation in the co-creative activities of the Smuggling Festival increases tourists' satisfaction and, in consequence, their willingness to revisit the destination. The analysis of the significant relationships considered in this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of the relationship between creative tourism experiences and satisfaction and loyalty. This emphasizes the importance of hands-on, unique and authentic activities that allow tourists to co-create their experiences, thereby increasing their sense of involvement and enjoyment. The results provide valuable management insights for tourism stakeholders and policymakers in this border region and in other destinations with similar contexts. Concluding with the analysis of significant relationships, the authenticity of the experience also has a significant direct impact on the intention to revisit the peripheral tourist destination (t-value 2.581). Finally, these results indicate that the tourist's satisfaction, the result of a memorable and authentic creative tourism experience, was an important predictor of intention to revisit as well as of the event being regarded as a truly authentic experience. Regarding the nonsignificance of the direct relationship between the creative tourism experience and the intention to visit the destination, the results suggest that the specific contextual variable of the creative tourism experience needs to be taken into account to improve our understanding of the equally specific connotations of the experience (Wang *et al.*, 2020). The dimensions established by Ali *et al.* (2016) may miss certain unique aspects of cross-border contexts; e.g. the coexistence of different languages, cultural and craft practices as well as administrative asynchronies that may undermine the interactivity, learning and enjoyment of the creative tourism experience (Shahabi *et al.*, 2025). In this sense, technical difficulties in managing cross-border cooperation programs (Cairo Carou, 2018) and unequal access to resources may result in significant differences in the municipalities' ability to organize festival activities. This suggests that memorable creative scenes have no impact on the intention to revisit without the mediation of visitor satisfaction.

Finally, taking BV as the dependent variable and the rest as independent variables, the coefficient of determination (R^2) yielded by the model is 0.607. In other words, the independent variables explain approximately 60% of the variance of the dependent variable, which is a moderate-high value, suggesting that the explanatory value of the model in this context is good.

5. Discussion

The results largely endorse the reliability of the model, confirming seven of the nine hypotheses and rejecting two. These results are in line with previous studies. The positive relationship between authenticity and intention to revisit is argued for by Liu (2020), Huyen and Thu (2023) and Javed and Awan (2023), which indicates that this is a prime concern for tourists. Tourists perceive the authenticity of a destination brand through their personal and subjective responses to its temporal consistency, credibility and originality. Temporal consistency involves the extent to which the destination retains and communicates its historical appeal and heritage as key elements of its brand identity. Credibility is about how well the destination's promise of entertainment and enjoyment matches what tourists expect

from their visit. Originality, an essential aspect of authenticity, is about how well the destination brand showcases its genuineness, distinctiveness and uniqueness ([Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020](#)).

Previous studies have argued for a positive relationship between authenticity and satisfaction and customer loyalty ([Atzeni et al., 2022](#); [Huyen and Thu, 2023](#); [Nam et al., 2023](#); [Park et al., 2019](#)). Activity-related authenticity that is internally and psychologically experienced is even more important than subjectively experienced external, object-related authenticity ([Nam et al., 2023](#)). Therefore, tourists who experienced the Smuggling Festival as authentic and genuine expressed higher levels of satisfaction and greater willingness to revisit.

Furthermore, the results prove that the creative experiences attended by the Smuggling Festival's visitors contributed to the creation of authentic, memorable and satisfying moments. According to [Gilmore and Pine \(2007\)](#), memorability is a significant result of engaging travel experiences. The positive relationship between these variables is confirmed by other studies on tourist behaviour ([Liu, 2021](#); [Wang et al., 2020](#); [Ali et al., 2016](#)). [Ali et al. \(2016\)](#) examine creative tourism at resort hotels, showing that tourists' creative experiences strongly predict how memorable their trip will be. This study also points out that creative tourism experiences create authentic, memorable and satisfying moments, arguing that the consumption and co-creation of experiences, in the context of the atmosphere, environment and setting of different activities, leads to durable memories. This study underlines the idea that creative tourism enhances the image of traditional culture and has a multiplying effect on the understanding and value of cultural resources in border regions as memorable and authentic assets, for instance, with the Smuggling Festival.

On the other hand, the results also point to a strong relationship between memorable tourism experience and creative tourist satisfaction. These results are consistent with those reported by previous studies ([Kahraman and Cifci, 2023](#); [Ali et al., 2016](#)). [Sthapit et al. \(2019\)](#) noted that there was a positive correlation between satisfaction and memorability; the higher the level of tourist satisfaction, the more intense the memorability of their experience.

Additionally, several studies corroborate that a satisfactory experience increases the intention to revisit ([Ali et al., 2016](#); [Astor et al., 2022](#); [Çetin et al., 2022](#); [Díaz-Sauceda et al., 2015](#)). [Suhartanto et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Heydari Fard et al. \(2021\)](#) show that contented customers exhibit greater loyalty and dedication to a destination. Favourable visitor sentiments towards a destination strongly correlate with the inclination to return, leading to reduced marketing expenses, enhanced profitability for tourism businesses and pivotal contributions to the success of destination marketing strategies ([Çetin et al., 2022](#); [Hasan et al., 2019](#); [Hossain et al., 2015](#); [Kim and Johnson, 2013](#)). According to [Oppermann \(1998\)](#), managing for previous visitors to return is six times more efficient than attracting new ones. Tourist satisfaction occurs when tourism performance exceeds expectations ([Lu et al., 2020](#)). In our study, these results indicate that tourists who visited the Smuggling Festival regarded it as a valuable experience, affecting their level of satisfaction and future choices.

Finally, the present study indicates that the creative experience and the memorability attached to the Smuggling Festival do not have a direct impact on the intention to revisit this border destination. However, through the mediation of perceived satisfaction, both are found to have a significant impact on the intention to revisit. These results are at odds with previous studies ([Hu and Shen, 2021](#); [Quan and Wang, 2004](#); [Stavrianea and Kamenidou, 2022](#)), which report that these variables are significantly correlated, because the relationship between memorable tourism experiences and tourists' post-visit behaviour helps service providers to design specific and truly unforgettable experiences for tourists, encouraging repeat visits. This unconfirmed relationship could be interpreted as follows: seeking intense sensations and experiences is not enough reason to recommend and return to a cross-border destination, as this outcome also requires satisfaction with the original choice. In other words, the intention to visit involves complex behaviour. According to the theory of behavioural planning (TPB), future intention depends on multiple factors: attitudes, social norms and perceived control. A positive experience can improve the tourist's view towards the destination, but if the tourist perceives

barriers (time and cost) or lacks the intention to always look for new places, it is possible that they will not plan to return, no matter how pleasant the memory may be (Çiki *et al.*, 2025). Similarly, as noted in the results section, the nonsignificance of the direct relationship between the creative tourism experience in the smuggling festival and the intention to visit the destination may be explained by the specificity of the contextual variable, which needs to be taken into account to improve our understanding of the full connotations of the experience (Wang *et al.*, 2020).

6. Practical implications and conclusions

Border tourism between Spain and Portugal is of great importance, and the focus on creative tourism adds significant value to this relationship, enhancing local development, sustainability and cultural valorisation. Spain and Portugal share an extensive border (the longest in Europe), facilitating cultural exchange. Traditions, languages and customs from both sides of the border mingle, creating a unique touristic offer. In addition, both countries collaborate on tourism initiatives through the Euroregion and projects funded by the European Union (INTERREG). Creative tourism turns visitors from mere spectators into active participants in cultural activities, which fits perfectly into the border dynamics. To date, very limited empirical research (Sharma *et al.*, 2025; Çetin *et al.*, 2022; Liberato *et al.*, 2025; Thornton *et al.*, 2018) has addressed memorable creative touristic experiences in border regions. To fill this gap, this study has analysed the extent to which creative tourist experiences play a significant role in the intention to revisit a cross-border tourist destination, using the Smuggling Festival, held in the towns of Sanlúcar de Guadiana (Spain) and Alcoutim (Portugal), in March 2023, as case study. The Smuggling Festival is a perfect example of creative tourism, as it makes the visitor an active participant in unique cultural experiences such as historical re-enactments, cultural and gastronomic exchanges and various art and music related events.

To analyse the experience and satisfaction of visitors to this creative, cross-border event, the study presents a model that analyses the relationships between five constructs: creative tourism experience (CRTE); memorability (MEM), authenticity (AUTH), satisfaction (SATF) and behavioural intention (BV). The value of this research is to contribute to the study of creative tourism strategies for the development of peripheral areas. This is intended to support the detection of trends in the management of border festivals as well as to form the necessary basis for the implementation of regional policies and growth strategies in predominantly rural regions threatened by high depopulation rates.

The results of the tests undergone by the model have three main theoretical implications. First, that the tourists' assessment of their experience with the creative tourism activities on offer at the Smuggling Festival had a positive and very significant impact on their perceptions of the event's memorability and authenticity. In this sense, tourists positively assessed some intangible attributes of the festival, such as feelings of relax, the kindness of the organisers, the festival's safety and feelings of intimacy.

Second, that the relationship between memorability and satisfaction is positive and significant. In this way, it can be argued that this cross-border tourist destination imprints positive and unique memories in the consumer's mind, which they are unlikely to ever forget, encouraging them to recommend the destination to other consumers (Keskin *et al.*, 2024; Gilmore and Pine, 2002).

Finally, our results also indicate that satisfaction was an important predictor of intention to revisit, as well as of the event being regarded as a truly authentic experience (Sengoz *et al.*, 2024). Brown *et al.* (2016) argue that feeling satisfied with a destination makes repeat visits more likely. Therefore, local agencies and residents must strive to protect authentic customs and traditions. To market tourism destinations, it is necessary to transform this potential, presenting it in a more creative way, making and enhancing memorable and lasting experiences for tourists.

This work makes both theoretical and practical contributions. In terms of theoretical implications, the predictive model developed in this study significantly adds to existing research. No previous study has addressed the project to revitalise the border region between the towns of Sanlúcar de Gvadiana (Spain) and Alcoutim (Portugal) through the creation of a tourist experience that revolves around intangible heritage, such as the Smuggling Festival. This study could help to refresh tourism in the regions straddling the Spanish–Portuguese border, while also contributing to recover and valorise elements of natural and cultural heritage of the area and boost its reeling economy.

In terms of practical implications, this study helps managers of shared services in these cross-border areas to redefine their communication strategies and build tourist loyalty, achieve performance targets and develop skills which give their product a competitive edge. These can be achieved by offering authentic and memorable creative tourism experiences. This helps create a non-seasonal tourism offer that focuses on shared history and intangible heritage, which encourages visitors to participate in co-creative tourism experiences, far removed from overcrowded coastal and cultural tourism destinations.

This new form of tourism is mainly characterised by originality and peculiarity. Therefore, creative tourism or festivals are presented as an alternative for peripheral regions to mitigate the rural exodus that many of them suffer. In this case, the construction of a zip line to cross from one country to another in 2009, alongside other projects in the region, such as the renovation of rural houses, the transformation of windmills into hostels, the construction of hotels or the creation of a caravan park, has encouraged economic growth and job creation locally. All of this is complemented by the catalogue of activities offered by the municipalities, such as zip-lining or canoeing (active tourism), cane and wicker workshops (cultural tourism), visits to the windmills (agricultural tourism), rock-climbing in the castle and its walls (cultural tourism) and the fiesta of the Virgin of La Rábida (ethnographic tourism).

For traditional service managers, this research can help to gain a deeper understanding of both new trends in creative tourist behaviour in cross-border regions and the changing landscape of global tourism. This study highlights the potential of creative tourism around intangible heritage to bolster border destinations. The results suggest that creative tourism experiences focused on shared intangible heritage help to integrate tourism flows in interconnected, European-scale, dynamics and to increase cross-border interaction in peripheral regions. The results also emphasise the crucial role played by these events in promoting social cohesion and cultural exchange in the region. By asserting their local identity, the residents of both towns unite around a common narrative, promoting a sense of community and belonging. Likewise, these events encourage the active participation of the inhabitants of both towns in both organising and carrying out the activities, from preparing the stages to taking active part in performances. This engagement strengthens bonds between neighbours. It should be noted that this type of festivals tends to attract both national and international tourists, which fosters a valuable exchange of ideas, customs and knowledge among participants. This mutual cultural flow significantly contributes to enhance the cultural experience of all involved, promoting understanding and appreciation of diverse traditions and perspectives.

Below, we present some more specific measures and key recommendations for policymakers to encourage the development and promotion of cross-border tourism. First, to strike collaboration agreements between local, regional and national bodies in both countries. This can include organising events and activities that involve towns on both sides of the border and creating a joint tourism offer that attracts more visitors. In relation to this, service managers could improve the management of festivals in rural and depopulated areas by stressing cultural authenticity, professionalisation of tourism agents and community involvement. Strategies designed to preserve cultural authenticity help to revive traditions, involve the community and avoid massification. Capacity building, in turn, can help train agents in creative tourism, digital marketing and the use of local resources to strengthen the circular economy. More specifically, training and awareness programmes on the importance of cross-border tourism could be offered to local tourism stakeholders (hotels, restaurants,

guides, etc.); these could also include ways to improve the visitor experience through a more integrated service tailored to the needs of international tourists. On the other hand, it would be interesting to promote the creation of bilingual or multilingual tourist offers, facilitating interaction with tourists who come from different parts of the world and who do not always speak the local language.

Finally, community participation, co-creation and the development of festival-related micro-enterprises can be promoted and infrastructures, access, basic services and traffic management can be improved in a sustainable manner. Investing in the improvement of transport infrastructures, facilitating access between the two countries and reducing logistical barriers is essential to incentivise cross-border tourism and facilitate tourist mobility. These actions, among others, can transform festivals into engines of sustainable cultural and economic development in rural regions.

7. Limitations and future research avenues

The main limitation of the field is the small number of studies that address creative tourism experiences in cross-border regions; this study is largely limited to analysing the behaviour of visitors to the Smuggling Festival. It is hoped that future studies will focus on tourist segments and creative experiences in other cross-border destinations. Therefore, it is necessary to apply the creative experience scale used in this study in other types of creative tourism activities and other cross-border regions to verify its adaptability. In addition, a better understanding of the relationship between creative experience and other variables such as tourist loyalty would help to clarify the important role of creative experience in tourism.

As noted, tourist involvement is a very important aspect of the creative experience, so the analysis could be complemented with the qualitative study of the different activities in the tourism event. This can lead to the evaluation of other possible dimensions of the creative tourism experience that have not yet been taken into consideration.

Moreover, in order to offer a more balanced view of the variables that could influence a tourist's intention to visit or revisit the Smuggling Festival, some contextual factors exclusive to the festival are worth mentioning. These have not been incorporated into our model but could help to improve our understanding of the tourists' intention to visit. It could also help future research to incorporate comparable variables for similar contexts. According to [Sharma et al. \(2025\)](#) and [Dean and Suhartanto \(2019\)](#), perceived value is a very significant variable in the field of creative tourism. It is defined as the comparison of the perceived benefits received and the perceived sacrifices made by a consumer in relation to a particular product or service ([Prebesen et al., 2013](#)). If tourists perceive that a visit to the Smuggling Festival offers good value, they are more likely to be satisfied with it and have a greater intention to behave positively and revisit. Therefore, future models could include the relationships between perceived value, visitor satisfaction and intention to visit. Other important variables are the image of the destination and perceived safety. Image is defined as people's perceptions of a particular destination, event, activity or person, which reflect their beliefs and prejudices ([Zheng and Chi, 2024](#)). Previous tourism studies have shown that image can be categorised as cognitive, emotional/affective and conative/general ([Chi et al., 2022](#); [Zheng and Chi, 2024](#); [Maldonado-Lopez et al., 2024a](#)). The general image of the Smuggling Festival reflects the general impressions and perceptions of visitors, relating to cognitive and affective aspects: the characteristics of the host location, the organisation of the festival/event, affections developed towards festival activities, etc. ([Zheng and Chi, 2024](#)). Finally, perceived safety refers to systems or structures put in place for the protection of attendees, such as surveillance technologies, the presence of authority figures, whether public or private (e.g. police or security guards), etc. "Protection" is the degree of threat or risk that an individual or group perceives and a feeling of safety can positively influence the decision to attend an event ([Hoover et al., 2022](#)). Tourists tend to value safety when attending crowded events, which could be related to their intention to participate in the Smuggling Festival.

Finally, this article is cross-sectional research. As such, it would be of interest to carry out future longitudinal studies to establish possible differences or similarities in the results over a longer time span.

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