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Research Article

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Adopting circular economy principles in the tourism sector – Shkodra Region

Valbona Paja
University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi", Shkodra, Albania,

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Abstract

The circular economy is an innovative approach that aims the efficient use of resources. This study explores the economic impact of the circular economy in the tourism sector in Shkodra Region, analyzing the financial benefits derived from optimizing the consumption of energy, water and other materials used in tourism operations.
This study aims to address the following questions:

- How does CE principles affect the reduction of costs for tourist operators?
- What are the most effective strategies for resource management?
- What are the main factors influencing the adoption of CE practices by tourism businesses?

The study is based on an empirical research approach, combining case study analysis with data collection through interviews with tourism operators in the Shkodra Region. The case studies include analyzes of businesses that have implemented circular economy strategies, evaluating savings in the use of energy and consumables.
Preliminary results show that businesses that have implemented circular economy measures, such as the use of photovoltaic panels for electricity production, water management systems and material recycling, have experienced significant reductions in operating costs.
Recommendations

- Encouraging investments in renewable energy, to reduce costs in the long-term.
- Implementation of water and energy management systems, through smart technologies.
- Promotion of supportive policies and fiscal incentives to facilitate the adoption of CE practices.

The results of this study show that the circular economy can have a significant impact on reducing costs for tourism operators, while simultaneously contributing to the development of a more sustainable tourism model.

Keywords: Circular economy, sustainable tourism, resource management, energy efficiency.

1 Introduction

Tourism constitutes a pivotal economic activity, exerting substantial influence on global economies, as evidenced by its generation of 9.1% of new employment

opportunities and its contribution of 9.1% to the global Gross Domestic Product in 2023. The World Travel and Tourism Council has predicted that, by 2026, the tourism industry will reach a value of USD 10,986.5 billion, which is expected to represent 10.8 % of the global gross domestic product (Strippoli et al., 2024).This sector's prominence is particularly pronounced in Europe, where it accounts for 9.4% of all employment, equivalent to 36.7 million jobs, and contributes 9.1% to the European GDP. According to World Tourism Barometer international tourism recovered 99% of pre-pandemic level in 2024. South Europe had the most impressive growth, reaching a level of 11% more international tourist compared to 2019. More specifically, Albania's recent economic trajectory highlights the transformative potential of the tourism sector, with inbound tourism expenditure consistently augmenting the nation's GDP over the past two decades, averaging 13.6% and reaching a zenith of 23.8% in 2023 (WTTC, 2024).

Despite its catalytic role in economic development and local prosperity, tourism engenders adverse environmental consequences, primarily stemming from the intensive utilization of resources and the generation of substantial waste streams. The circular economy constitutes an economic model designed to minimize waste and maximize resource utilization, rendering it indispensable for the tourism sector. The adoption of circular economy principles in Shkodra's tourism sector necessitates a fundamental shift in mindset and operational practices across the entire value chain. This transition demands a move away from the conventional linear economic model, often described by its "take-make-dispose" methodology, and towards the adoption of closed-loop systems. This involves redesigning tourism products and services to minimize waste generation, prioritize the use of renewable and recyclable materials, and extend the lifespan of existing assets. Emphasizing the refurbishment, repair, and reuse of tourism-related infrastructure, equipment, and amenities further reduces the demand for virgin resources and minimizes waste sent to landfills (Geissdoerfer et al., 2016; Segarra-Oña et al., 2024). Central to the circular economy approach are strategies such as extending product lifecycles through durable design and repair services, recovering valuable resources from waste streams for reuse in new production cycles, and embracing product-as-a-service models where consumers lease or rent products rather than purchasing them outright (2022). Also, the sustainable approach in circular economy allows to save costs and obtain environmental benefits in the long run (Lacy, n.d.).

The potential economic benefits of embracing circular economy principles within Shkodra's tourism sector are substantial and encompass a wide array of advantages. Firstly, resource efficiency leads to significant cost savings for tourism businesses. By minimizing waste generation, optimizing energy consumption, and utilizing locally sourced and sustainable materials, businesses can substantially reduce their operational expenses and improve their profitability. Secondly, circular economy practices can stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship by creating new markets for recycled materials, remanufactured products, and innovative waste management technologies. This encourages the development of new businesses

and job opportunities within the local economy, fostering economic diversification and resilience. Furthermore, tourists are increasingly seeking out sustainable and responsible tourism experiences. Shkodra's commitment to circularity can enhance its attractiveness as a destination for environmentally conscious travelers, boosting tourist arrivals and revenue. The establishment of robust resource management frameworks is paramount for realizing the environmental and economic benefits of a circular tourism economy.

To effectively transition towards a circular tourism economy in Shkodra, a multi-faceted approach involving collaboration between government, businesses, and local communities is essential. This involves developing clear policy frameworks that incentivize circular practices, providing financial support and technical assistance to businesses, and raising awareness among tourists and local residents about the benefits of circularity. Governments can play a crucial role by enacting policies that promote waste reduction, incentivize recycling, and encourage the adoption of sustainable tourism practices. Also, they can provide financial incentives, such as tax breaks and subsidies, to businesses that invest in circular economy initiatives.

Moreover, collaborative partnerships between tourism businesses, local communities, and research institutions are essential for developing and implementing innovative circular solutions tailored to the specific context of Shkodra. This collaborative ecosystem can facilitate the exchange of knowledge, resources, and best practices, accelerating the transition towards a circular tourism economy. Moreover, the effective implementation of circular economy principles requires careful monitoring and evaluation of progress using relevant indicators and metrics. This will enable policymakers and businesses to track their performance, identify areas for improvement, and ensure that circularity initiatives are delivering the desired environmental and economic outcomes.

This research delves into the application of circular economy principles within the tourism sector, with a specific focus on cost optimization. The research will explore how the principles of circular economy can be applied to reduce costs and increase efficiency in tourism. By examining a case study of a tourism-related business in Shkoder, Albania, this study aims to provide practical insights into how these principles can be effectively implemented in a real-world setting.

2 Literature Review

The concept of the circular economy has emerged as a compelling alternative to the traditional linear economic model, which is characterized by a "take-make-dispose" approach that depletes natural resources and generates substantial waste. In contrast, the circular economy emphasizes the importance of maintaining the value of products, materials, and resources within the economic system for as long as possible, thereby minimizing waste generation and promoting sustainability (Pattanaro & Gente, 2017). Circular Economy emerges as a strong framework for sustainability and development(Rodrigues et al., 2024). At its core, the circular economy seeks to

decouple economic growth from resource consumption by promoting practices such as reuse, repair, refurbishment, and recycling (Dhonde & Patel, 2020; Sciortino & Cantis, 2022). This approach not only reduces environmental impact but also creates new economic opportunities through innovative business models and resource management strategies (Rahla et al., 2021). The traditional open-ended economy lacks inherent recycling mechanisms, treating the environment as a waste reservoir; the circular economy establishes closed production systems where resources are reused in a loop, creating more value for a longer period (Urbinati et al., 2017). This approach leads to reduced consumption of raw materials and decreased waste production.

The implementation of circular economy principles in the tourism sector presents both significant opportunities and unique challenges. Tourism, while being a major economic driver, often exerts considerable pressure on the environment and local communities (Avasiloaei, 2022; Shet, 2022). The sector's reliance on natural resources, energy consumption, and waste generation can have detrimental effects on ecosystems and cultural heritage (Năstase & Avasiloaei, 2021). Integrating circular economy principles into tourism operations can mitigate these negative impacts while enhancing the sector's sustainability and resilience. Circular tourism, aligned with sustainable development principles, seeks to harmonize tourism with responsible resource management, striving to deliver tourism products and services with minimal environmental repercussions (Avasiloaei, 2022). Circular tourism represents a strategic shift from conventional linear models, prioritizing the conservation of natural capital, optimization of resource utilization, and the pursuit of zero waste generation (Shet, 2022). By adopting circular economy practices, tourism businesses can reduce their environmental footprint, improve resource efficiency, and enhance their brand image, attracting environmentally conscious travelers.

However, the transition to a circular economy in tourism is not without its obstacles. One of the primary challenges is the fragmented nature of the tourism industry, which involves a complex network of stakeholders, including accommodations, transportation providers, tour operators, and local communities. Coordinating circular economy initiatives across these diverse actors can be difficult, requiring collaborative efforts and shared responsibility. Implementing circular practices in tourism demands a comprehensive transformation of traditional business models, supply chains, and consumption patterns. This transition requires considerable investment in new technologies, infrastructure, and training programs, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises that may lack the resources and expertise to implement circular economy practices effectively. Furthermore, the seasonal nature of tourism can create fluctuations in demand and resource consumption, making it challenging to implement consistent circular economy practices throughout the year.

Despite these challenges, the potential benefits of circular economy implementation in the tourism sector are substantial. By embracing circularity, tourism businesses can reduce their operational costs through resource efficiency and waste reduction. Moreover, circular economy practices can enhance the quality of tourism experiences by preserving natural and cultural assets, which are essential for attracting tourists

(Sciortino & Cantis, 2022). Embracing circularity allows tourism destinations to diversify their economies by creating new revenue streams through waste valorization, eco-tourism, and other sustainable activities. The shift to circular tourism can redefine destinations as assets comprising natural and social stocks that must be protected and optimized for the long-term benefit of all stakeholders (Erdiaw-Kwasie et al., 2023).

Cost optimization in tourism has traditionally relied on conventional methods such as streamlining operations, improving efficiency, and negotiating favorable deals with suppliers, while novel approaches increasingly incorporate sustainability considerations to minimize both environmental impact and operational expenses. These methods are valuable, but the adoption of circular economy principles introduces innovative strategies that further enhance cost-effectiveness and sustainability in tandem. By minimizing waste, maximizing resource utilization, and fostering collaboration across the value chain, tourism businesses can unlock new opportunities for cost savings while simultaneously reducing their environmental footprint (Kiaušienė et al., 2024). New business models based on the circular economy can help transform the tourism industry in this disruptive process (Avasiloaei, 2022).

The adoption of circular economy principles in the tourism sector can unlock new avenues for cost optimization, which lead to enhanced environmental sustainability and operational efficiency. One way of optimizing costs is by implementing the main circular economy strategies which include reducing, recycling, and reusing (Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2019).

The evaluation of innovative business models is also significant when considering sustainability in the tourism sector. By prioritizing waste reduction, resource efficiency, and collaboration, tourism businesses can achieve significant cost savings while contributing to a more sustainable and resilient industry. As circular economy principles are increasingly integrated into the tourism industry, there is a growing need for innovative methods to evaluate and optimize these business models (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018) (Sciortino & Cantis, 2022). Life cycle costing is used to evaluate the total cost of an asset through its life cycle, and it can be combined with material flow cost accounting to provide a comprehensive overview of the costs and benefits associated with circular economy initiatives (Perello-Marin et al., 2022). Furthermore, by embracing circular economy principles, tourism businesses can enhance their brand reputation, attract environmentally conscious customers, and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the industry. This can be achieved through collaborative initiatives, technological advancements, and policy interventions that support the transition to a circular economy in tourism (Kiaušienė et al., 2024) (Manniche et al., 2021) (Jones & Wynn, 2019).

More attention needs to be paid to how host communities or resident populations perceive circular practices, as these stakeholders enable and support tourism at their destination, and are impacted by tourism activities (Shet, 2022). Ultimately, by fostering a collaborative and innovative approach, the tourism sector can embrace the circular economy and create a positive impact on both the environment and society (Shekhar, 2024).

A number of tourism firms have recognized the economic and environmental benefits of adopting a circular approach, which includes minimizing waste, conserving resources, and reducing costs. By reducing environmental problems associated with unsustainable tourism across a wide range of tourist destinations, circular economy initiatives can help improve their overall revenue (Erdiaw-Kwasie et al., 2023). Innovation and application of the 4R principles (reduce, reuse, recycle, recover) are crucial for transitioning towards a circular economy in the tourism sector (Aryal, 2020). These principles encompass Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Recover, providing a framework for minimizing waste generation, maximizing resource utilization, and promoting closed-loop systems within the tourism industry (Kiaušienė et al., 2024).
The adoption of circular economy strategies is significantly influenced by the rate at which individuals and businesses integrate these strategies into their operations, which underscores the importance of assessing social changes related to the circular economy (Walzberg et al., 2021). In addition, the incorporation of sustainability principles can positively influence perceptions, especially among those who already value sustainability (Kiaušienė et al., 2024). This transition aligns with broader circular economy principles by optimizing resource utilization and minimizing waste. A number of tourism firms have recognized the economic and environmental benefits of adopting a circular approach, which includes minimizing waste, conserving resources, and reducing costs. (Segarra-Oña et al., 2024).
By embracing these principles, tourism businesses can enhance their environmental performance, reduce costs, and create new opportunities for growth and innovation. The aim of this paper is to investigate more in the optimizing operational costs through the circular economy by applying the principles which leads to innovation and environmental sustainability in the tourism sector.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study centered on a comprehensive analysis of a spa wellness center, with a specific focus on its energy consumption patterns and the contribution of renewable energy sources to its overall energy profile. The research commenced with an in-depth interview with the spa's manager, designed to gather qualitative data regarding operational practices, energy management strategies, and historical energy consumption trend. This qualitative data provided a crucial context for the subsequent quantitative analysis, ensuring that the numerical data was interpreted within the framework of the spa's specific operational characteristics. Following the interview, a detailed investigation into the spa's energy consumption was conducted, encompassing all major energy-consuming systems, such as heating, ventilation, air conditioning, lighting, water heating, and pool operations. Data on energy consumption was obtained from utility bills and sub-metering data, providing a view of energy usage across different time periods. Simultaneously, data was collected on the energy production from the photovoltaic panels installed on the spa's premises. This included the system's rated capacity, actual energy output. This data was essential

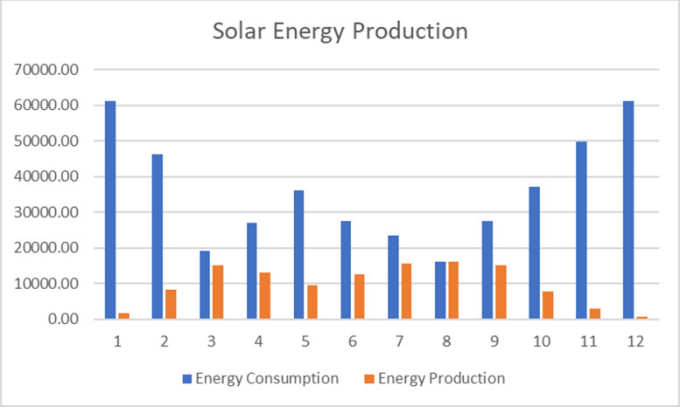
for quantifying the contribution of renewable energy to the spa's overall energy needs and for assessing the effectiveness of the photovoltaic system in reducing reliance on conventional energy sources.

Following the data collection phase, a rigorous quantitative analysis was undertaken. The energy generated by the PV system was compared to the total energy consumed by the spa to determine the percentage of energy needs met by renewable sources. A thorough cost-benefit analysis was performed to evaluate the economic viability of the photovoltaic system, considering factors such as initial investment costs, operational and maintenance expenses, energy savings. The methodology also included an assessment of the environmental impact of the spa's energy consumption, focusing on the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions achieved through the use of renewable energy. This was accomplished by converting energy consumption data into equivalent carbon dioxide emissions using standard emission factors and comparing the emissions with and without the photovoltaic system from EPA website. This approach not only quantifies the cost savings but also underscores the environmental stewardship benefits of integrating renewable energy sources into spa operations (Zemīte et al., 2024)

4. Results and discussions

An in-depth analysis of Luani A SPA Wellbeing Centre's energy consumption patterns, coupled with an assessment of the energy production capabilities of its installed photovoltaic panels, has evidenced a significant opportunity for cost savings; specifically, the data indicates that a potential reduction of 27% in energy costs is achievable through optimized energy management strategies. The graph below shows the average level of energy consumption, as well as the average amount of energy production by photovoltaic panels.

Figure 1
Solar energy production and average consumption by month



Source: Author`s elaboration

The transition to green energy production at Luani A SPA Wellbeing Centre extends beyond mere economic advantages, demonstrably contributing to a reduced carbon emission profile and aligning the company with broader ecological stewardship objectives. Using the website of EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) of the USA, it is evaluated that the contribution of Luani A Wellbeing center, in the reduction of the CO2 emission in one year is approximately 48.4 tons of CO2. This reduction in environmental impact underscores the potential for tourism enterprises to actively participate in mitigating climate change through strategic energy transitions. Implementation of sustainable practices such as energy-efficient lighting and water-saving technologies are commonly adopted measures with significant impact (Khan et al., 2021), not only in reduction of operational cost but also aligns with environmental objectives (Rodrigues et al., 2024), that Albanian business need in order to compile with sustainability objectives and CE directives necessary for the European integration.

Despite usage of renewable energy the business has adopted also other initiatives that aim at creating sustainably. They have reduced the use of plastics in their premises. Although recycling practices are not required from the local authorities, they try to do their one recycling using for example the coffee as a fertilizer for their garden. The business has adopted efficient management of water resources in the pool and the showers. They have installed sensors placed at the windows, in order to control the air conditioning operating only with doors and windows closed. The business has adapted to the requests of the some of their clients to offer more sustainable service, although they perceive that most of their clients do not adopt any sustainable practices like saving water, or electricity. The same practices that they performed at their houses, are not practices in the places they visit.

The tourism sector, while possessing significant potential for embracing circular economy principles, grapples with several inherent challenges that impede widespread adoption (Manniche et al., 2021). These barriers include substantial upfront capital investments in novel technologies and infrastructure upgrades, a perceived lack of readily available support mechanisms such as government subsidies or preferential loan programs, knowledge deficits concerning the intricacies of circular economy principles and their practical implementation. Although it is seen as a good momentum for businesses to transit to sustainability practices, due to the raised awareness among different stakeholders. Furthermore, the fragmented nature of the tourism value chain, involving a multitude of independent actors, complicates the establishment of coordinated circular economy initiatives, requiring collaborative efforts across diverse sectors to achieve meaningful progress (2022). The transition toward a circular economy necessitates a fundamental shift in mindset, requiring businesses to critically evaluate their existing practices and embrace innovative approaches to resource management, product design, and waste minimization (Sánchez, 2019).

Small and medium-sized enterprises like the case of Luani A have numerous advantages by implementing circular economic strategies, such as insulation

from rising resource and energy expenses, the encouragement of innovation, the enhancement of brand reputation.

5. Conclusion

The case study of Luani A Wellbeing Centre SPA underscores the vital role of sustainable practices in contemporary wellness tourism, highlighting the potential for such establishments to serve as models for environmental responsibility and community engagement. By integrating sustainable principles into its operations, Luani A Wellbeing Centre SPA can mitigate negative externalities commonly associated with the tourism industry, while simultaneously contributing to the achievement of broader sustainability goals (Santos et al., 2023). The implementation of circular economy measures is paramount, ensuring that resources are utilized efficiently by prioritizing the reuse of materials and minimizing waste generation through comprehensive recycling and composting programs, which aligns with global efforts to combat climate change and promote responsible consumption. Furthermore, Luani A Wellbeing Centre SPA can harness technology to optimize resource management, including smart systems for monitoring and regulating energy and water consumption, thereby diminishing operational costs and environmental footprint. This holistic approach not only enhances the SPA's ecological integrity but also strengthens its brand image, attracting environmentally conscious consumers who are increasingly seeking out businesses committed to sustainable practices. Investing in renewable energy sources is another crucial step, allowing the SPA to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels and decrease carbon emissions, as solar panels can provide clean energy for heating, cooling, and electricity, demonstrating a commitment to environmental stewardship.

Moreover, collaborative initiatives with local communities are essential for fostering mutual benefits and ensuring the long-term sustainability of Luani A Wellbeing Centre SPA, as partnering with local farmers and artisans to source products and services supports the local economy while reducing transportation-related emissions.

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