

TRANSFORMATION DESIGN FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISM: A PARADIGM SHIFT FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND WELL-BEING IN DESTINATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the need to reflect on how systems for implementing tourism practices should be redesigned to facilitate sustainable social transformation in destinations. Responsible tourism today is implemented on existing (unsustainable) tourism systems and is visible through the planning of sustainable actions influenced by the political agenda and applied individually by service providers, stakeholders and tourists. If we shift the observation perspective of the system, can there really exist a form of responsible tourism that has a positive impact on the territories and communities that host it? In this scenario, transformation design of tourism fosters the implementation of processes and approaches that involve local communities and stakeholders in the definition of a new systemic social, cultural and economic paradigm. The paper presents a model for co-designing responsible tourism services in destinations, shifting the focus from consumer perception to the actual sustainability implications within host communities. The framework is intended as a cue for critical reflection with a view to resizing the tourism offer by questioning the current model of mass tourism in favour of a tourism structure oriented towards the creation of social and cultural value. The theoretical framework intends to propose a perspective in which destination tourism systems are designed giving greater value to communities, territories and cultural resources. The research aims to reflect on the concept of sustainability as a premise on which to design participatory practices for responsible tourism reaching a systemic sustainable balance moving from an extractive to a generative economy for local communities in destination.

Keywords: transformation design, responsible tourism, community-based practices, local scale systems, tourism degrowth.

1 INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector has undergone multiple evolutions in recent decades due to its dynamic and complex nature. While globalised mass tourism characterised the demand for tourism in the 20th century, in the new millennium this demand is significantly stronger and diversified, induced also by the emergence of new information technologies, greater ease of travel and the increase in the supply of affordable accommodation [1]. As an ever-expanding industry it has become an integral part of the global economy, offering unparalleled opportunities for economic growth and cultural exchange. While the tourism sector has unlocked numerous economic benefits and advantages, it has also given rise to several pressing challenges, many of which are inextricably linked to sustainability issues [2].

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that overdevelopment, environmental degradation, excessive tourism, cultural commodification and economic inequalities within host communities are now unsustainable. Addressing these problems requires systemic changes in production and consumption, driven by high-level policy decisions [3]. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have put pressure on tourism scholars and practitioners to embrace new ways of understanding, interacting and prioritising sustainable tourism. Several studies have noted that although the SDGs cover a broad spectrum of social, cultural, political and environmental issues, they are primarily articulated in the perspective



of economic growth [4]. In the context of tourism, this orientation lays a high priority on marketing development, market-oriented strategies, and policy agendas that fundamentally envision a largely unchanged global system until 2030 [5], [6]. The necessity and consequences of the exponential growth of tourism activity experienced worldwide over the last half-century have been increasingly questioned by a growing number of activists and critical researchers [7]. One of the emerging responses within this debate concerns the call for the reversal of tourism ‘degrowth’ [8]–[15].

The paper proposes a systemic shift from an extractive to a generative approach to tourism and tries to reflect upon and identify a framework for responsible tourism that could implement processes and approaches involving local communities and stakeholders within socio-cultural and economic paradigms. A collaborative approach emphasises complexity, interdependence, and the essential role of design in fostering sustainable tourism development [16], [17]. Recent literature on the role of design in the tourism sector highlights how experiences of service design and participatory design are confined to the application related to the user experience, while few applications exist to date in the participatory design of tourism services with communities and local administrations. This paper is relevant to this discussion as it aims to highlight the potential of design tools and approaches in reorganising decision-making processes and protocols within tourism service systems. Through this paradigm shift, responsible tourism can achieve long-term sustainability and equitable development, redefining the tourism industry’s role within the broader context of global sustainable development.

2 CORRELATION BETWEEN TOURISM PRACTICES AND THE DIMENSION OF SUSTAINABILITY

Over the past few years, discussions on tourism strategies are increasing the consideration and adoption of sustainability-related development drivers [18]. The concept of sustainability originated several decades ago, culminating in the Brundtland report ‘Our Common Future’, which brought the global environmental debate and the notion of sustainability to the forefront of global and local, social and political agendas and thoughts [19]. Following the ‘Our Common Future’ legacy, in the early 1990s Edward Inskeep defined five main criteria for sustainable tourism, which addressed the economic, environmental and social responsibility of tourism as well as its responsibility towards tourists (visitor satisfaction), global justice and equity [20]. More specifically, according to the UNWTO, sustainable tourism is a ‘tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities’, while sustainable development refers to three pillars (economic, socio-cultural and environmental) that, when practised by tourism operations, enable long-term sustainability [21].

Theoretically, this concept of sustainable development aims to maintain economic advancement and progress while protecting the long-term value of the environment; it ‘provides a framework for the integration of environmental policies and development strategies’ [19]. What is immediately apparent is the failure to consider the social aspect of sustainability and the interconnection between the pillars that constitute sustainable development. Indeed, there is no need for a trade-off between environmental sustainability, social sustainability and economic development. The three dimensions are strongly interconnected and work in balance.

The cited definitions, however, are relatively abstract and vague. There is considerable space for interpretation when it comes to identifying concrete sustainable tourist behaviour or sustainable tourism industry practices [22]. The lack of clarity also leads us to fail to



consider the topic in its entirety, but always deal with it superficially and discontinuously. It is therefore necessary to manage complexity by defining more clearly the different elements that make up this system. Setting specific systemic objectives to translate the meaning of sustainability into objectives and requirements for the design of tourism products and services would consolidate the environment–society–economy continuity [3]. All these definitions highlight several pluralities. Designing a responsible tourism product-service system (PSS) means considering multiple sustainability issues and creating an experience that reflects all these pluralities.

As a result of these presented considerations, the current discussion around the concept of sustainability in tourism is related to its application. Despite several decades of academic and practical debate on tourism sustainability, its application in practice remains problematic. Wheeller [23] argued that the ‘intellectually appealing’ concept of sustainable tourism has little practical application because it has been turned into a public relations tool for addressing the criticism of the impact of tourism while allowing essentially the same behaviour as before. Still, tourism authorities continue to promote the growth of tourism through unsustainable models despite the ecological and social constraints we are currently experiencing [4]. These dynamics within host communities are now unsustainable and characterise what could be defined as extractive tourism [24]. A form of tourism that exploits local resources to generate only economic value, subtracting socio-cultural and environmental resources. A tourism that basically takes more than it gives.

As a consequence of this discussion, sustainable tourism research, documents and actions have recently been increasingly accompanied by the notion of responsible tourism, e.g., ‘Charter for Sustainable and Responsible Tourism’ [25], ‘Responsible Tourism’ [26] and ‘Taking Responsibility for Tourism’ [27]. Sustainability, as a concept, encompasses a comprehensive view of long-term viability, addressing economic, environmental, and social dimensions of tourism. Responsible tourism, on the other hand, focuses on action and behaviour, emphasising the imperative to take responsibility for the impacts of mainstream tourism. It involves consumers, suppliers, and governments in a shared commitment to enhance positive aspects and reduce negative impacts. Responsible tourism is grounded in accountability, the capacity to act, and the capacity to respond, promoting a dialogue and action to make tourism more sustainable [27]. While the two concepts are related, they are not synonymous; responsible tourism builds on sustainability-based strategies and policies and emphasises appropriate behaviour and responsibility [28] to ensure tourism practices align with sustainability goals, awareness and ethics.

From a design point of view, a sustainable system that supports a form of responsible tourism is one that maintains or enables a high ‘quality of context’ without depleting resources, emphasising that a sustainable solution must be combined with a better quality of life, both social and physical. In this direction, a sustainable design solution can be defined as the process through which products, services and know-how compose a system that allows people (who are part of the system) to achieve an outcome according to their needs and expectations, which maintains a high quality of well-being of the destination and its communities. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge the challenges faced by communities seeking development as they become increasingly dependent on tourism, often at the cost of their autonomy and well-being, in response to a global trade system that perpetuates their underdevelopment [4]. The complex interplay between sustainability, responsibility, and the consequence for local communities underscores the need for a more holistic and equitable approach to tourism development and management.



3 METHODS

The research was conducted in two main phases. The first phase involved a review of the relevant literature and in particular the synergies between tourism studies (and tourism sector) and design field. From this first phase, the authors outlined the trajectories for the definition of the theoretical framework of reference. Following this, a case study was analysed and discussed in the light of the previously defined theoretical framework.

This study employs a comprehensive theoretical framework centred on the concepts of responsible tourism and sustainable social transformation. By integrating key principles from existing literature on responsible tourism and community empowerment, the framework provides a structured approach to analysing and redesigning tourism systems. We incorporate the criteria defined by prominent scholars and organisations [25]–[27] to outline what constitutes responsible tourism, emphasising accountability, stakeholder engagement, and environmental stewardship. Building on theories of social transformation [29] and community empowerment [4], we explore how tourism practices can be restructured to promote equitable, community-based and authentic PSS and improve local well-being.

To contextualise and validate the theoretical framework, a case study approach is used. This method allows for an in-depth examination of a specific case where responsible tourism initiatives have been implemented, providing empirical evidence on the practical application of responsible tourism principles and their impact on local communities. The chosen case study is Utravel [30], an Italian tour operator company known for its responsible tourism promotion practices. The case was selected for the presence of active community involvement, documented sustainable tourism practices and measurable outcomes related to social sustainability.

Finally, the synthesis and interpretation of theoretical and empirical findings draw conclusions on the transformative potential of responsible tourism. The discussion considers implications for tourism policies, community engagement strategies and future research directions. Combining a sound theoretical framework with detailed case study analysis, this methodology provides a comprehensive approach to examine how tourism systems can be redesigned to promote sustainable social transformation and community empowerment.

4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A PARADIGM SHIFT MODEL FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISM IN DESTINATIONS

This contribution intends to bring a critical conceptualisation of how transformation design [31] – through participatory practices – can facilitate the transformation towards responsible tourism models. For this reason, the authors' thesis focuses on responsible tourism as a form of tourism that applies through participatory practices and actions based on principles and theories of sustainability.

The model presented in this paper originates from the analysis of a model for the penetration of environmental awareness in society and its policy for 'responsustainable tourism' [29]. Mihalič [29] and Mihalič and Kaspar's responsible tourism model [32], referred to as the 'triple-A model', is a comprehensive framework that aligns the development of environmental responsibility within the tourism sector based on Frey's social stages [33], which underpin the process of sustainable transformation. The model consists of four interconnected stages: Ignorance, Awareness, Agenda, and Action, represented as steps towards the successful implementation of sustainability. At the base of the model lies the Ignorance stage, wherein stakeholders are oblivious to environmental issues, driven primarily by non-environmental values. As awareness grows and stakeholders become informed about tourism's environmental impacts, the destination enters the Awareness stage, recognising the significance of sustainability. The next stage, Agenda, involves the incorporation of



sustainability issues into strategic discussions and policy considerations, marking the journey towards sustainable action. Finally, in the Action stage, stakeholders exhibit environmental responsibility by consistently aligning their behaviour with sustainability goals and standards (Fig. 1).

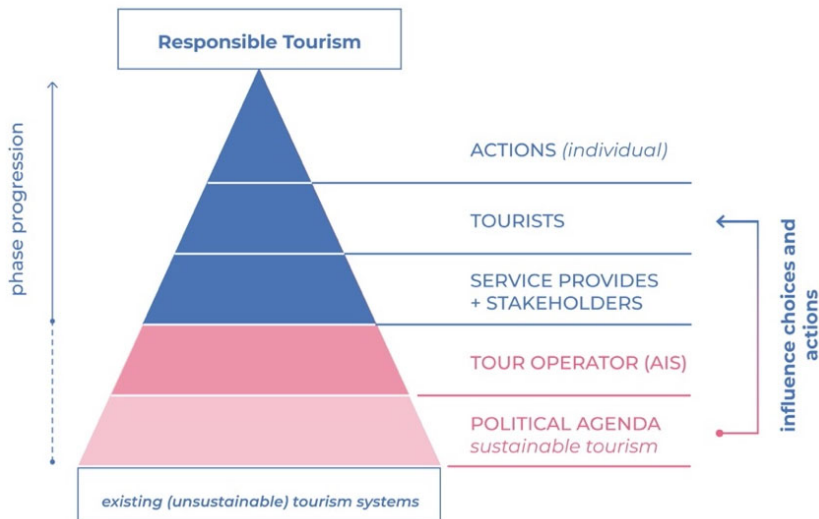


Figure 1: Responsible tourism implementation model. (Source: Authors' interpretation of Mihalic and Kaspar's model.)

This model presents a progressive path with stakeholders in the progression of sustainability-responsibility, recognising the potential for asymmetrical development in the economic, environmental and socio-cultural dimensions. The triple-A model emphasises the importance of continuous progress but highlights the difficulty of collaboration between stakeholders in achieving goals. What is clear from this model is that the different stages follow each other by transforming an output of the previous level into an input for the next level, but without interconnections between the different non-adjacent levels. Furthermore, in this model, the destination can reach the highest stage without having fully developed the characteristics of the previous stages, thus losing the possibility of establishing a solid base from which the objectives of responsibility originate. This model assumes that it is based on unsustainable pre-existing systems. Therefore, it is clear that it is not possible to define as sustainable a model of responsible tourism geared on an unsustainable basis.

As mentioned above, sustainability in tourism must be understood as a process of social transformation. In this model, responsible tourism is implemented through the planning of sustainable actions influenced by political agenda and applied individually by service providers, stakeholders and tourists, generating a series of individual actions. Responsible tourism today is mainly visible in the behaviours and action of the actors in the blue belt. In fact, academic research state that the social impact assessment in this system is based mainly on customer satisfaction and perceived destination sustainability [34]. The impact of social sustainability is minimised if territories and local communities are not considered as active participants in the planning of the tourism offer. In this process, communities are seen as passive actors in the system. Research in the tourism sector focused on an outside-in

perspective, which means a focus on the customer experience [35]. Adopting an inside-out perspective, through the application of a design approach, it is possible to address tourist experiences and co-design tourism services from host communities favouring sustainable social impact. Design applied to tourism services can support the emergence of a more collaborative, sustainable and creative society and economy. The transformative role of design is combined with the potential transformative role of services.

Therefore, what happens if we try to change the point of view by adopting an inside-out perspective? Is it possible to have a responsible tourism model that positively impacts the sustainability of the regions and communities of destinations? By changing the observational point of view, it is possible to operate at the base of the system. Supporting and encouraging local collaboration, not just partnerships and cooperation, should be a central principle for intentional transformation [36]. This transformation implies a re-imagining of tourism practices from the bottom-up, involving various stakeholders, including local communities, governments and businesses, to bring the tourism system more in line with sustainable development goals, ensuring the harmonisation of economic, social and environmental dimensions. This holistic approach to partnership and collaboration is essential for the evolution of tourism models that truly contribute to global sustainable development. From this perspective, the authors have defined a new theoretical model of participatory design of responsible tourism services in destinations [29], shifting the focus from perceived sustainability to the actual sustainability implicit in place-based communities (Fig. 2).

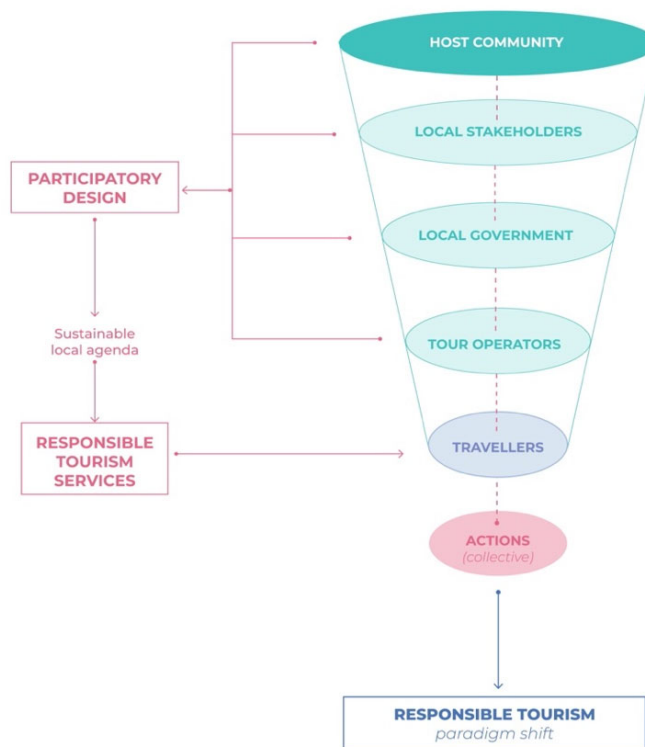


Figure 2: Proposed evolution of the model of Mihalic and Kaspar, (1996, 2016). Hypothesis of a paradigm shift model for responsible tourism in destinations.

The process of transformation integrates the viewpoints of various stakeholders, ranging from businesses and policy makers to tourists and local communities, in order to jointly create services that embody and demonstrate responsible tourism. In their introduction, Burns et al. [37] emphasised the concept of transformation design's emphasis on ongoing innovation and adaptation within organisations that are subject to ongoing change. Transformation Design acts as a catalyst as the tourism industry develops, helping to redefine the destination's role within the larger framework of sustainable development and to rethink the tourism experience itself. Co-production's central tenet highlights the necessity of stakeholder development on a collective level, encompassing service providers as well as the communities they engage with.

Starting with these ideas, the framework for creating a new model for the bottom-up implementation of responsible tourism in destinations presents design as a tool for defining community action and organisational development practises. Our proposal suggests that the co-creation of a responsible tourism service entails a collaborative effort, a radical shift, and the revelation of tourism's role in creating a better world – not just for itself, as in sustainable tourism – in concert with others. Put differently, 'designing with is the essence of an ethical and ongoing involvement of others through respect for their values and ways of being in the world' [16].

5 UTRAVEL: A CASE STUDY OF RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

A case study approach is used to contextualise and validate the theoretical framework. This approach provides empirical evidence on the actual application of responsible tourism principles and their effects on local communities, allowing an in-depth analysis of a particular case where initiatives have been implemented. As a case study was selected the Italian tour operator Utravel, known for its ethical tourism marketing strategies. The case was chosen because it included documented sustainable tourism practices, measurable social sustainability results and active community involvement.

Utravel was founded in 2019 within the Alpitour World Group as travel start-up aimed at under-30s. Its main goal is to generate value in the destinations where it operates, transforming each holiday into an adventure of meeting and personal growth in which young people live in synergy with local community, cultures and territories that welcome them. In just a few years, Utravel has become an important reality dedicated to young people, projected to go beyond the traditional concepts of holidays and spread a new travel philosophy: more than the destination, what counts is the spirit and the approach with which travellers want to explore the world.

Alpitour is one of the most important Italian and European players in the tourism sector specialising in the All-Inclusive offer, which includes all-inclusive travel, transfer and accommodation. Even though Utravel initially based its business model on Alpitour's offer systems, systems that are questionable from the point of view of sustainability and responsibility, over the years it has managed to build its own model of tourism based on local communities and responsible practices. For this reason, we believe that the case is relevant to the reflections proposed in this article.

The offering of Utravel is primarily based on Club trips, group travels where there is no pre-arranged schedule of activities and experiences. Each traveller is given complete autonomy in choosing their experiences. The start-up collaborates with non-profit and local entities, even very small ones, to promote economic development and social growth in communities. This also involves engaging locals as 'Coach' in every destination, Utravel seeks and trains a local Coach and micro-entrepreneurs who can offer authentic experiences. They try to provide locals with collaboration opportunities, helping them with bureaucratic



tasks and providing them with our technology. The goal is to create a circular tourism model where the traveller is not just a tourist but has the opportunity to have conscious experiences, respecting the places they visit and generating a positive impact.

Utravel has identified two directions in which it aims to work towards achieving common benefit goals, which have a positive impact both for local communities and travellers. The first pertains to the destinations where Utravel operates and where it can and wants to make a tangible impact. The second pertains to the youth, its primary target, to whom it wants to offer development and sharing opportunities:

First objective: to promote economic development and social growth in the communities where it operates through a tourism model that prioritises collaboration with local suppliers and partners at the destination, and the creation of synergies with companies, non-profit organisations, institutions, and/or foundations whose goals are aligned with those of the company, thereby amplifying the positive impact of its actions.

Second objective: to foster the personal and professional growth of new generations and users through the creation of opportunities for cultural exchange and interaction, the sponsorship of cultural and sports projects for young people, and the promotion of a corporate culture aimed at inclusion, work flexibility, and the appreciation of diversity.

6 DISCUSSION

This paper provides a new conceptual framework for the development of responsible forms of tourism through design practices. The text clearly highlights the urgent need to develop alternative approaches, attitudes and designs capable of promoting more inclusive collaboration processes in the context of responsible tourism. In response to this need, we propose a deliberate link between responsible tourism and the methodology of transformation design. In the last decade, service design has started to consider services less as objects of design and more as means for societal transformation. In this evolution, both organisations and citizens are called upon to evolve and adapt to more collaborative service models, thereby changing their roles and interaction patterns [38]. In light of this, the questions that arise are: How can designers working with communities influence and transform organisations, or vice versa, how can designers working within organisations positively influence and transform user communities? In this multidisciplinary context, it is necessary to adopt key concepts and principles derived from research fields that have focused for decades on themes of transformational change within organisations and communities, such as organisational development and community action research. Participatory action research has been specifically chosen as a possible integrative methodological framework that characterises both the fields of organisational development and community action research, and that could be adapted to the needs of service design practices in tourism [31].

The proposed vision based on the introduction of participatory design is particularly relevant for the understanding and development of responsible tourism. Since practices are forms of activity that are socially recognised and organised around a shared understanding of a problem [39], we suggest that sustainable tourism refers to tourism practices compatible with the concept and norms of sustainability [2].

The ability of designers in this context is to promote approaches and methodologies for the participatory and democratic planning of tourism PSSs. Their ability lies in recognising the best solutions (for the needs and desires of all parties involved) and which, at the same time, can be seen as more sustainable solutions (from a social and environmental point of view). When this happens, designers, and the companies that produce and supply the solutions, enable users/customers to switch from non-sustainable system and non-sustainable



behaviour to more sustainable behaviour. What users demand is not a particular system of products or services, but the results that these products and services enable them to achieve.

Given these premises, the case study of Utravel can be analysed as a form of responsible tourism by applying the model proposed by the authors.

Socio-cultural responsibility: (a) Cultural sensitivity. Utravel ensures that its tours are respectful of local cultures and traditions. This involves educating tourists on cultural norms and encouraging respectful interactions with local communities through the figure of the coach; (b) Community engagement. They engage in building relationships with local communities to create tours that benefit them. This includes hiring local guides, supporting local activities and designing tourism services from the existing local offer.

Economic responsibility: (a) Local economic support. Utravel focus on ensuring that the economic benefits of tourism are distributed fairly within the local economy. This involve promoting locally owned businesses, using local suppliers, and ensuring fair wages for all employees involved in their tours; (b) Long-term economic planning. They are engaged in long-term planning to ensure that tourism remains a sustainable and viable industry for the region, without causing economic dependence or resource depletion.

Implementation of policies and management strategies: (a) Comprehensive policies. Utravel implemented a set of policies that guide their operations towards sustainability. This would include clear guidelines on social impact, community relations, and economic practices; (b) Transparency and accountability. The tour operator might maintain transparency in their operations, regularly publishing reports on their sustainability practices and outcomes. This ensures accountability and continuous improvement.

Utravel can be considered a tour operator that proposes a form of responsible tourism, it effectively integrates environmental, socio-cultural, and economic responsibilities into its operations, supported by comprehensive policies and transparent management strategies. This holistic approach ensures that tourism not only thrives but also contributes positively to the destinations and communities involved.

The case study analysed introduces multi-level participatory practices that confirm the paradigm shift model proposed by the authors (Fig. 3). Tourism design in this direction already offers many reflections on new forms of more sustainable tourism. This analysis highlights how the design and co-creation of memorable experiences and transformations is a fundamental design activity in the transition towards a set of more sustainable services and solutions [40]. The interpretation of the theoretical model through the Utravel case study has also highlighted the important role of the communities, as local communities or communities of tourists and peers that operate on the physical world or in online social networks, in tourist practices. Communities provide valuable input in tourist practices that support decision making and the implementation of tourist activities. Especially for sustainable tourism, research can investigate the role of communities in the adoption of sustainable tourism practices and the interconnection between services and the support of tourists' sustainable plans [2].

In this framework, participatory design emerges as an optimal approach for co-designing tourism services to foster the sustainable development of local communities. Participatory design has effectively triggered inclusive projects and dialogues by engaging a complex social dimension comprising diverse actors [41]. Moreover, it aligns with the political role of design in facilitating participatory democracy and advancing themes such as social justice, activism, inclusion, and agonism [43], [44] The reflective nature of participatory design, devoted to the principles of inclusion, ethics, and democracy, makes it a compelling choice [45]. Additionally, its narrative power emerges as a potentially effective method in fostering



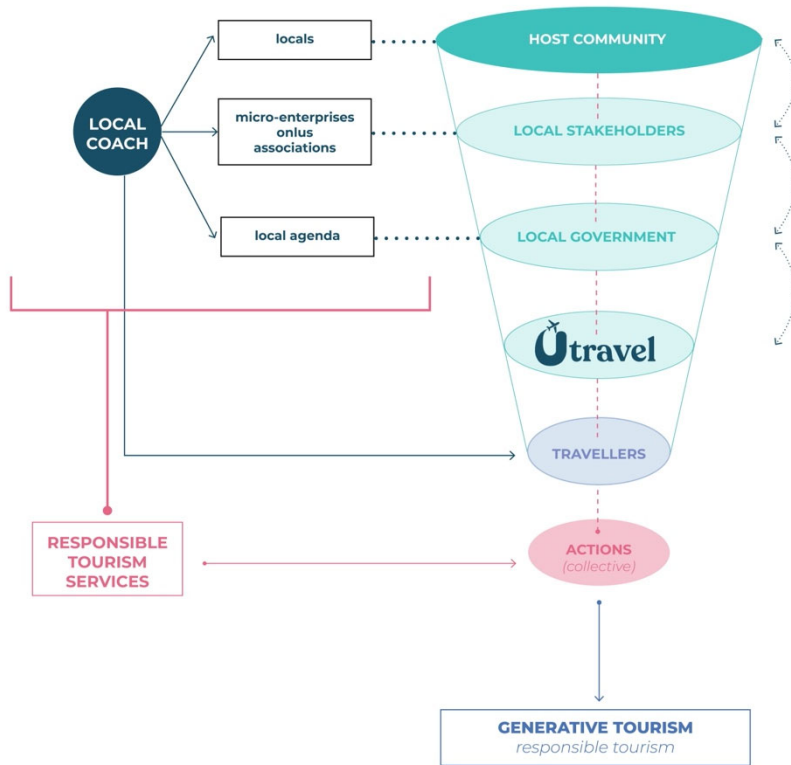


Figure 3: Interpretation of the theoretical framework through the Utravel case study.

empathy and making individuals feel involved in decision-making processes. Moreover, participatory design aligns with the political role of design in facilitating participatory democracy and advancing topics such as social justice, activism, inclusion, ethics, and democracy. A participatory approach involving the social fabric of the tourism system fosters the emergence of generative forms of tourism.

Generative tourism refers to a type of tourism that goes beyond conventional forms of travel and consumption. It emphasises active participation, sustainable practices, and meaningful interactions between tourists and local communities. Generative tourism aims to create positive impacts on both the environment and the socio-cultural fabric of destinations, fostering mutual understanding, respect, and long-term benefits for all stakeholders involved.

7 CONCLUSIONS

In this scenario, transformation design acts as a catalyst in the ongoing evolution of the tourism industry, redefining destinations' roles within the broader context of sustainable development and reimagining the tourism experience. The paper presents a model for co-designing responsible tourism services in destinations, shifting the focus from consumer perception to the actual sustainability implications within host communities.

This approach aims to be a critical reflection on the possibility of downsizing the tourism offering at the destination through a degrowth approach, giving greater value to communities, territories, and cultural resources. From this perspective, design within the sphere of

responsible tourism should take on the involvement of local communities and stakeholders not to produce more engaging products, services and experiences for visitors, but to make the tourism experience a balancing act of socio-economic benefits for host communities and tourists. Designing in this direction should provide an opportunity to think about new systems of tourism services that challenge the current model of mass tourism in favour of a tourism set-up oriented towards the creation of social and cultural (not only economic) value.

Secondly, the inclusion of design creates a collaborative space in which administrators and civil society can participate in future world-building. This is something that has not been done before in the literature on collaboration in tourism and sustainability research [46]. Sustainability must be seen more as an opportunity through which design can drive social and cultural transformations in the collective tourism imagination [47]. Recent literature [2] emphasises that sustainability should be a new option for tourists and should be promoted and supported. This is true but the importance of the self-determination of host communities and the need for tourists to adapt to the sustainable practices defined by the communities themselves is crucial. This paper proposes an alternative approach to the analysis and design of sustainable tourism practices, in which the focus is not the consumer's journey, but the well-being and sustainability of host communities. The paper's contribution to the advancement of sustainable tourism focuses on understanding how tourism practices can be designed and controlled by local communities, giving them the power to decide how they want tourism to develop in their territories.

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