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Revisiting the CCIs-tourism nexus: insights from Smart Specialisation Strategies

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In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the importance of interrelationships between cultural and creative industries (CCIs) and tourism for cross-industry innovation and sustainable local development. The purpose of this study is to deepen the understanding of the role and relevance of the CCIs-tourism nexus for innovation-driven socio-economic transformation of territories through regional policy design and implementation in Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3). To this end, a thematic analysis has been conducted to explore the links between CCIs and tourism in RIS3 prioritization choices and whether and how it has been revisited from the previous programming period (2014–2020) to the current updates of strategies (2021–2027). The findings provide insights into the focus and evolution of this nexus to address the role of CCIs in enabling innovation-led regional development for the triple transition.

KEYWORDS

cultural and creative industries, tourism, Smart Specialisation Strategies, innovation, triple transition

Introduction

The last years have witnessed growing attention in European research and policies toward the relevance and variety of forms of innovation in cultural and creative industries (CCIs) and their catalytic role in promoting growth, wellbeing, sustainability and social cohesion (Sacco and Segre, 2009; European Commission, 2018; Sacco et al., 2018; Council of the European Union, 2022) and contributing to Sustainable Development Goals (Gustafsson and Lazzaro, 2021). The recent launch of the new Culture & Creativity¹ Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC) by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) aims at strengthening and transforming cultural and creative sectors and industries and addressing current European socio-economic challenges related to employment, resilience, and smart growth, thereby leveraging the potential

1 <https://eit-culture-creativity.eu>

of CCIs for economic, technological and social innovation through a holistic and integrated approach (European Union, 2021). The newly established EIT KIC is set to harness the potential of Europe's cultural and creative sectors and industries to facilitate the green, digital and social transitions.

In this context, the CCIs-tourism nexus plays a leading role, given the relevance of cultural and creative production in the experience economy and cultural tourism (European Investment Fund, KEA European Affairs, 2021) and its contribution to the promotion of sustainable growth (OECD, 2022b) and local development (Borin et al., 2022).

This study focuses on the relationship between CCIs and tourism and its relevance for the triple green, digital and social transitions within the Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3), which represent an important instrument of the European Cohesion Policy. Under the 2014–2020 programming period, the development and implementation of RIS3 was introduced as an ex-ante conditionality for receiving financial support from European Structural and Investment Funds under Europe's 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. In the current programming period (2021–2027), RIS3 contribute to the Cohesion Policy's objective "A smarter Europe through innovation and support for economic transformation and modernization" and represent an enabling condition for Member States to be met throughout the cycle. Smart specialisation plays a pivotal role in strengthening and connecting regional innovation ecosystems and in consolidating CCIs policy across different areas, also through integrated approaches with tourism (OECD, 2022a). For this reason, it is worthwhile to investigate the interrelationship between CCIs and tourism in the prioritization choices of European regions and countries within RIS3 to provide insights into its role in innovation-led regional development agendas for the triple transitions. Specifically, this study presents the findings of a qualitative thematic analysis aimed at exploring how the CCIs-tourism nexus is represented in the RIS3 of a sample of European territories prioritizing CCIs, and whether and how it has been revisited from the previous programming period (2014–2020) to the current updates of strategies (2021–2027).

Theoretical and policy background

Synergies between CCIs and tourism for innovation-driven sustainable development

In the new European policies scenario, the integration between CCIs and tourism emerges as a critical area to fuel innovation for the triple transition (green, digital and social). It is emphasized that the impact of complementarities between these

sectors extends beyond the traditional contribution of cultural heritage and the creative economy to cultural tourism. Policymakers have started to recognize the role of cultural and creative sectors in supporting tourism diversification and innovation, place branding and marketing, more sustainable practices, local regeneration and communities' social cohesion (OECD, 2022b). The Transition Pathway for Tourism launched by the European Commission (2022b) highlights the links between the tourism ecosystem and cultural and creative industries not only for developing innovative tourism based on cultural heritage, traditions, arts and authentic cultural experiences, but also for the development of new markets and new sustainable and accessible forms of tourism services through the development of innovative approaches such as the creation of local digital twins, in line with the objectives of the European data space for cultural heritage. The Pathway also acknowledges the importance of the integration of cultural and tourism policies to improve the economic resilience of rural and remote regions and residents' wellbeing (European Commission, 2022b). The critical importance of the CCIs-tourism relationship is further highlighted in the current debate on cultural heritage for climate change with regard to opportunities to enhance the resilience of indigenous communities as well as to inspire action for climate change and to support behavioral change processes that favor the uptake and diffusion of greener social and economic practices (European Commission, 2022a; JPI Cultural Heritage and JPI Climate, 2022).

The CCIs-tourism nexus is a major source of multiple developmental effects also in the context of a state-of-the-art understanding of the relationship between culture and creativity and the many possible forms of economic and social value creation, highlighting CCIs' broader socioeconomic impact through several crossover interactions with other economic and social sectors (Sacco et al., 2018; Gustafsson and Lazzaro, 2021), in line with the New EU Agenda for Culture (European Commission, 2018) and the Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026 (Council of the European Union, 2022). This change may be conceptualized as a shift from Culture 1.0 to Culture 3.0 paradigm of value creation (Sacco et al., 2018), which identifies an 8-tiered classification of the indirect developmental effects of culture, notably in relation to innovation, wellbeing, sustainability, social cohesion, entrepreneurship, lifelong learning, soft power, local identity. Similarly, a significant shift has been noticed in the relationship between culture and tourism, leading to an upgrading of cultural tourism models built upon the as yet untapped potential of intangible heritage and creativity (World Tourism Organization, 2018), and upon a sharper focus on the authenticity of tourism experiences, more deeply connected to the everyday living culture of the destination, as well as constantly rejuvenated by the co-creation of contents and experiences (Richards, 2021). Also, within the context of a growing emphasis on post-pandemic tourism innovation

questioning established tourism development models, culture-led tourism ecosystems can play a critical role in driving actions and strategies for a transition towards more sustainable models of tourism development for cities and regions (Borin et al., 2022). In this perspective, the need has been highlighted to rethink how cultural and creative industries engage with other sectors, such as education, health and tourism, within broader multi-sectorial and multi-stakeholder ecosystems that can serve as driving forces for long-term sustainable development (Borin and Donato, 2022).

The CCIs-tourism nexus in Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3)

Developed around 2009 in the context of the innovation policy discussion of the Knowledge for Growth Expert Group established by the Research Commissioner Janez Potočnik (Foray et al., 2009), the concept of smart specialisation acknowledges the limits of relying only on horizontal policies, such as improving human capital and transfer of technologies, and the need for policymakers to experiment also with vertical, more targeted interventions that concentrate resources on a set of activities identified through an inclusive, bottom-up process (Foray, 2014). The underlying logic of smart specialisation introduced a paradigmatic change in regional innovation policy by emphasizing the principle of prioritization to build capabilities in specific fields, technologies, sub-systems that are likely to effectively transform regional economies. Also, a method to select such specialisation areas for intervention is defined, namely, the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP), as the main source of information regarding the domains to be prioritized through the mobilization and integration of entrepreneurial knowledge (Foray, 2014; Foray, 2015). Based on a collaborative governance approach, EDP is an interactive, mainly bottom-up process that engages actors from the quadruple helix to identify potential new activities and competitive advantages as well as challenges and priorities (Estensoro and Larrea, 2023).

Defined as place-based economic transformation agendas that focus policy support and investments on key national/regional priorities, challenges and needs for knowledge-based development, RIS3 support a broad view of innovation encompassing both technological and practice-based social innovation and are based on stakeholder engagement for identifying top priorities through an inclusive, interactive process centred on “entrepreneurial discovery” (Foray et al., 2012, p. 8). Priorities, as defined by the European Commission (2023), can be framed in terms of “knowledge fields or activities (not only science-based, but also social, cultural and creative ones), sub-systems within a sector or cutting across sectors and corresponding to specific market niches, clusters, technologies, or application of technologies to

specific challenges.” RIS3 entail evidence-driven decision-making for the prioritization of investments as well as monitoring and evaluation systems for revising and updating strategic choices (Foray et al., 2012, p. 8; Komninou et al., 2021). RIS3 play a key role in boosting regional innovation ecosystems by establishing the right strategic framework for focused investments on high value-added priorities and a shared vision of regional development (Conte and Ozbolat, 2016). The current debate emphasizes the contribution of RIS3 for orientating regional and national pathways towards Sustainable Development Goals. To this purpose, methodological guidelines have been provided by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission to incorporate sustainable development goals into the design, implementation, and monitoring of the strategies (Miedzinski et al., 2021) and several regions have started experimenting with a challenge-driven EDP to embed sustainability challenges into their updated RIS3 (Miedzinski et al., 2022).

Literature and empirical investigation specifically focusing on CCIs and tourism interrelationships within RIS3 is still limited. Indeed, a research gap has been observed about smart specialisation, CCIs and tourism (Biagi et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2022). At a general level, it has been noted that RIS3 tend to focus on science and high technology-related industries, neglecting industries such as tourism (Weidenfeld, 2018) and CCIs (Stanojevic and Gustafsson, 2021; Meyer et al., 2022). This conclusion is supported by the findings of the mapping of innovation priorities between 2014 and 2020 by the Joint Research Centre (Sörvik and Kleibrink, 2015) showing that the most common priority in the main categories of “research and innovation capability” was manufacturing and industry (34.6%), whereas creative and cultural arts and entertainment and tourism, restaurants and recreation only accounted for 4.6% and 3.9%, respectively, of total priorities. More recently, the study on prioritization in smart specialisation strategies in Europe (European Commission, 2021) revealed that the topics Agrofood and Bioeconomy (21%), ICT and Industry 4.0 (15%), Health and Life Sciences (15%) are addressed most by priority areas, while Tourism, Cultural and Creative industries account for a relatively smaller share (9%).

In the previous programming period, cultural and creative industries and/or cultural heritage were included in the RIS3 of around 100 European regions, both within regional and national priorities (OECD, 2022a). The analysis conducted by Stanojevic and Gustafsson (2021) on cultural heritage and circularity showed that culture is mentioned in 80 regions and 103 priorities representing 33% and 7% of the total regions and priorities included in the Eye@RIS3 database, respectively. Further, it found that only 10% of the EU regions prioritize cultural heritage. Focusing on tourism as a priority of smart specialisation policies, Biagi et al. (2021) found that 32% of European regions prioritize tourism in their RIS3, including both developed tourism destinations as well as territories

without tourism specialisation. However, these studies do not explicitly address the characterization of the linkages between CCIs and tourism. In a study of the interrelation between tourism, smart specialisation and territorial resilience, [Bellini et al. \(2017\)](#) identify five policy approaches, most of them entailing critical links with CCIs: 1) tourism modernization through ICT for enhanced destination management, including links to media and creative industries for specific applications (e.g., industrial design and audio-visual) and to cultural heritage digitization; 2) tourism for innovation culture, to promote place branding to capitalize regional identity, which entails the valorization of art, history and cultural elements for brand development and creative tourism; 3) tourism-generating innovation, highly focused on orientating tourism strategy toward value propositions related to emerging fields such as health and wellbeing; 4) tourism-pulled innovation, where the dimensions of the tourism market provide an opportunity to develop new products and services from other sectors, as exemplified by the links between cultural assets, tourism and sustainable constructions within the same priority; and 5) tourism moderation, aimed to reduce the negative aspects of tourism (i.e., seasonality, congestion, unbalanced resource consumption) in favor of other related activities. [Meyer et al. \(2022\)](#) stress CCIs' potential for sustainability and resilience of the tourism sector in the RIS3 policy nexus for the South Baltic Sea Region. Based on the analysis of several innovation cases, they show how the intervention of CCIs in tourism is strongly linked to social, environmental, economic, and institutional sustainability.

Methodology

This paper examines how the nexus between CCIs and tourism is represented within RIS3 in Europe in the current programming period (2021–2027) to provide insights into the relationship of culture and creativity with tourism in innovation-led regional development agendas. This analysis is part of a broader mapping of Cultural and Creative Sectors and Industries in RIS3 aimed to identify synergies between RIS3 and the EIT-KIC Culture and Creativity strategic intervention areas. The analysis of the potential links between RIS3 priorities and EIT-KICs' focus areas represents a key step for promoting any kind of collaboration between the EIT Community and regional/national stakeholders, including the EIT Regional Innovation Scheme (EIT RIS) that aims to disseminate EIT KICs know-how as well as widen the participation in EIT KICs in countries and regions with moderate or modest innovation capacity according to the European Innovation Scoreboard ([Özbolet et al., 2019](#)).

The study adopts a qualitative approach based on a mapping and thematic analysis of RIS3 to investigate the relevance of the CCIs-tourism nexus in the European landscape in terms of territories (regions/countries) with priorities linking CCIs and

tourism, the thematic foci/domains of the relevant priorities and the evolution of the nexus from the previous programming period. The material analyzed consists of the RIS3 documents of European regions/countries and the specific unit of analysis is identified in RIS3 priorities. Two parallel sources were used to identify the sample of territories and related RIS3 to be analyzed:

- The dedicated online database Eye@RIS3 providing comprehensive information on the public investment priorities for innovation.² The database is structured according to the Eurostat NUTS nomenclature and contains for each region/country information about priorities as described in their RIS3. It was fully upgraded in September 2018 for the previous programming period, while RIS3 in the current programming period are continuously being updated based on inputs from European regional and national authorities;
- The list of EU Member States that are eligible for the EIT Regional Innovation Scheme (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia), which were prioritized in the desk research for material collection since this scheme promotes synergies between EIT KICs and regions and countries through their RIS3 ([Özbolet et al., 2019](#)).

This approach to data collection allowed the identification of a sample of territories that align with the EIT KIC Culture and Creativity strategic needs as well as with previous research on RIS3 and CCIs based on data from the online tool Eye@RIS3 (i.e., [Stanojev and Gustafsson, 2021](#)).

Operationally, the Eye@RIS3 database (as of June 30, 2023) was downloaded and manually screened to identify European territories with relevant priorities based on priority description and related information on economic, scientific and policy domains. From this screening, 39 territories (regions/countries) prioritizing CCIs at the national or regional governance level were identified, based on a broad definition including core cultural and creative sectors but also the fashion industry and the high-end industries in line with a holistic view promoted by the [European Commission et al. \(2016\)](#). In parallel, the desk analysis of RIS3 documents of other 40 EIT RIS-eligible European regions/countries³ yielded 33 relevant territories that

² <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/web/guest/map>

³ In relation to EIT RIS-eligible European regions/countries, the analysis fully covered 12 States through their national or regional RIS3 (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia) and partially covered 4 countries (Greece, Poland, Romania, Spain), i.e., not including all the strategies implemented by their regional entities. For Italy, the region Basilicata was not included, as its RIS3 was in the process of being updated.

include CCIs in their priorities. From this total of 72 territories, 43 territories (40 regions and 3 countries) were identified as relevant for this study, as they prioritize both CCIs and tourism in their RIS3, for a total of 55 priorities. Information about the territories and their RIS3 priorities was collected in a spreadsheet, including the National/Regional Innovation Scoreboard profile, year of publication of the updated strategy, name and description of CCIs and tourism-related priority areas, and changes from the previous programming period (2014–2020). Data analysis was performed through a categorization of relevant priorities based on the level of focus on the sectors under examination, notably territories that address CCIs/tourism within a cross-sectorial/cross-challenge priority area (e.g., circular economy), territories linking CCIs and tourism in the same priority area, and territories identifying dedicated priorities for innovation in CCIs and/or tourism. Further, a thematic analysis was carried out to identify the specific topics of relevant priorities. Thematic analysis calls for the iterative development of codes, consisting of words or short phrases that capture the essence/attribute of a text, for salient themes to emerge inductively from the texts (Neuendorf, 2019). In this way, the main themes of priorities were identified from their description through an inductive, manual coding implying an iterative process of code generation, refinement and collation for the definition, revision, and identification of topics. It is worth noting that priorities are differently defined by Member States/regions, with some indicating generic definitions and others being very specific regarding the identification of innovation areas/domains/trajectories, which were considered in the generation of codes. The main topics identified through this process have been then associated to the three areas related to the digital, green and social transitions, taking into account the connections across them. Finally, relevant cases of regions/countries prioritizing the CCIs-tourism nexus were analyzed more in-depth to provide insights into their strategies relating to the interplay of CCIs and tourism for regional innovation-led development.

Findings

The findings of the analysis are presented in relation to the three specific objectives of the study, notably mapping the landscape of territories prioritizing CCIs and tourism in their updated smart specialisation strategies, identifying the specific focus of the priority areas, and tracing the evolution of the CCIs-tourism nexus as represented in the priorities from the previous programming period.

The landscape of prioritizing territories

Based on the analysis of the description of priorities, 43 territories (40 regions and 3 countries) were identified that

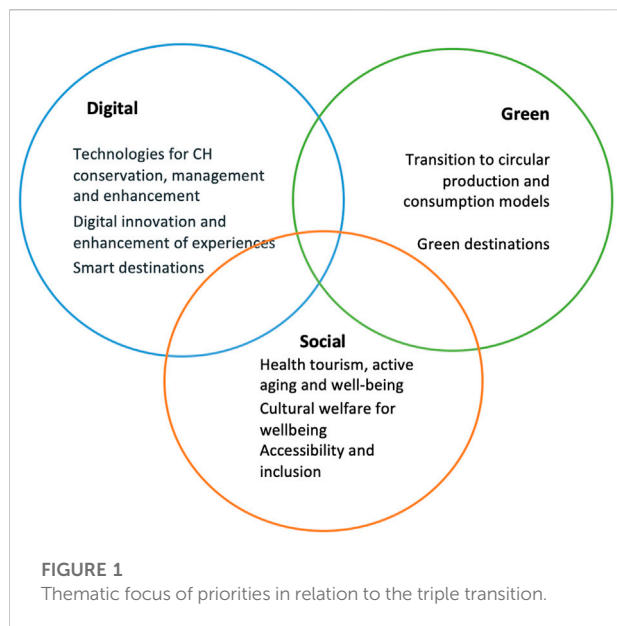
prioritize both CCIs and tourism in their RIS3, representing 60% of our pool. Considering only those encoded in the Eye@RIS database, the territories with both tourism-related and CCIs-related priorities account for 51% of the regions/countries with at least a priority dedicated to CCSI and for 43% of the total featured territories up to June 30th. Several regions participate in the interregional partnerships created along shared RIS3 priorities within the Smart Specialisation Platform to develop investment projects for industrial modernisation, notably **Cultural and Creative Regional Ecosystems**, which are focused on cultural and creative experiences involving the use of new technologies, and the Digitalisation and Safety for Tourism partnership aimed to enhance the competitiveness and smooth operation of tourism businesses.⁴

The relevant territories in our sample are characterized by a varied profile in terms of innovation performance as measured by the Regional Innovation Scoreboard/European Innovation Scoreboard (European Commission, 2023). Specifically, half of the territories are Moderate Innovators (51%); the remaining include Emerging Innovators (25.6%), Strong innovators (21%) and Innovation Leaders (2.4%). This provides a preliminary indication that selecting regions and countries that prioritize CCIs and tourism does not amount to restricting attention to a specific class of innovation performance.

Looking more in detail into our sample, the representation of CCIs and tourism in regional/national RIS3 is differently defined by territories and includes two separate priority areas for CCIs and tourism (26%); an integrated priority blending CCIs and tourism (33%); a cross-cutting priority including tourism and CCIs (11%); a CCIs-related priority which includes also tourism (14%); and vice versa, a tourism-focused priority that includes a reference to CCIs (16%).

Therefore, different approaches can be identified as to how regions/countries prioritize CCIs and tourism in their strategies for innovation-led development, based on the distinctive characteristics of their territories and the results of the EDP. In some cases, the strategies are characterized by a more focused approach on CCIs and tourism through two separate priority areas to concentrate investments and efforts in each priority area more intensely, as in the cases of Abruzzo, Alentejo, Algarve, Lisbon, Marche, Navarra, Norte and Veneto. For instance, the Abruzzo region identified “Fashion/design” and “Sustainable mobility and tourism” within its specialisation strategy, with the latter being added in the update of the previous strategy and stemming from the systematization of the priorities of the Logistics and Mobility Cluster, related to the issues of energy and climate, and those of the Tourism Cluster related to the integration of new technologies in the tourism sector and the development of sustainable tourism. In other territories, a more

⁴ <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/s3-industrial-modernisation-partnerships>



integrated approach is adopted through the interrelation of CCIs and tourism in the same priority. This approach features both regions that include linkages between these domains within a specialisation area focusing either on CCIs or tourism—as in the case of the Region Autonoma of Madeira which defined a tourism-related priority for developing the destination including the preservation and enhancement of the natural, historical, and cultural heritage—and those choosing to focus on a stronger, more systemic connection between CCIs and tourism in regional innovation. In the case of Emilia Romagna, for example, these are prioritized at the same level and interconnected with “Made in” products to support the promotion of the regional identity, the development of local value chains and the strengthening of social cohesion. It is worth noting that this region can be considered a best practice for the design of a Sustainable Smart Specialisation Strategy which incorporates Sustainable Development Goals in the EDP for the revision of the 2014–2020 strategy. Finally, a third approach emerges that leverages the innovative potential of these domains within broader, cross-cutting priorities, as in the case of Puglia’s “Digital, creative and inclusive communities,” which focuses on value chains that provide high value-added services for increasing social cohesion as well as digitization of the regional society, blending innovations in cultural, creative and tourism services with social innovations for the local communities.

The thematic focus of priorities

From the thematic analysis of the priority areas, several key topics emerge as the focus of smart strategies for innovation-led development. In particular, eight macro-themes of the relevant

priorities have been identified that can be related to digital, green and social transitions (Figure 1). It is worth noting that these themes are not totally mutually exclusive, as some regions focus on multiple trajectories across the three areas, also in the same priority. For instance, regions focusing on innovation for destination management often link smartness with decarbonization objectives with the purpose of developing smart and sustainable destinations.

Synergies between CCIs and tourism for the digital transition

The relationship between CCIs and tourism assumes a high relevance in addressing the challenges of the digital transition within the analyzed RIS3. The selected priority areas strongly focus on the role of technologies in stimulating innovation-led development in the CCIs and tourism sectors at the territorial level. The digital transition theme is addressed according to different approaches, from more focused ones related to the application of technologies to support the conservation, management and restoration of cultural heritage, to broader approaches focusing on the role of digitisation in the development of innovative solutions and contents according to an experience economy perspective, to destination-centered approaches aimed at the development of intelligent destinations and their promotion through innovative technologies (e.g., Virtual reality).

As an example of the first approach, technological innovation in cultural and creative industries is at the heart of the Italian region of Tuscany 2021–2027 RIS3. The whole strategy is structured around four regional Technological Priorities (Digital technologies; Technologies for advanced manufacturing; Advanced materials and nanotechnologies; Technologies for life and the environment) and five areas of application, among which a specific area is dedicated to Culture and Cultural Heritage. Within this dedicated priority area, innovation and digitization are addressed as essential, on the one hand, to enhance regional skills to support cultural and creative organizations in the strengthening of their competitive positioning; on the other hand, to enhance the existing cultural assets of Tuscany, facilitating access and use, conservation and participation, also by specific social groups. The 2021–2027 RIS3 of the Campania region in Italy also stands out for its effort to promote connections between the culture and the touristic sectors and the attention paid to new entrepreneurship in the CCIs in close interaction with the digital transition. For the 2021–2027 programming period, the RIS3 Campania identifies 8 innovation ecosystems (as an evolution of the 6 specialisation areas of the 2014–2020 strategy), among which one is dedicated to CCIs/tourism. The “Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Creative industries” priority is conceived of as an integration between the productive domains of cultural heritage and tourism and the creative industries. With respect to the previous programming

period, a stronger emphasis on the CCIs and their relation with tourism emerges. The dedicated priority was refocused to highlight the impact on the entire regional culture industry, which includes a range of activities varying from companies operating in the historical-artistic architectural heritage sector to the creative industries that take culture as an input, and to promote the growth and digitization of the regional economy and foster new entrepreneurship.

An experience-centered approach aimed at the development of innovative solutions and technologies (AR, VR, MR, AI, wearable sensors, robotics) for increased attractiveness and sustainability characterizes the RIS3 developed by Sardinia and Sicily in Italy, Dalarnas län in Sweden, and the Satakunta region in Finland. The latter is structured around nine knowledge and innovation clusters, among which the “experience economy” that includes tourism, cultural and creative services and events, and is meant to support the region’s growth with a specific aim to increase its attractiveness and the wellbeing of its residents by investing in the experience economy and the digitization of tourism and cultural services and events. “Sustainable Creative Experiences” is one of the priority areas identified by the Dalarna län region (Sweden), which integrates the regional strengths in the field of gaming and tourism. The region positions itself as one of the world leaders in game production as well as a fast-growing tourism destination. The strategy thus intends to develop Dalarnas as a destination for sustainable active, creative and cultural experiences for residents and visitors, blending tourism, sports, culture and creativity.

Finally, an approach focused on the development of smart destinations also emerges from the analysis as in the cases of Navarra, Slovenia and Veneto. The Italian Veneto region identified two dedicated priorities on culture and creativity and intelligent destinations. While the former focuses on technologies for cultural heritage, creativity and innovation for “made in” products, and design technologies for creative products, the latter aims at leveraging the potential of digital technologies for the touristic valorization of cultural heritage, the sustainable valorization of natural areas, the promotion of tourism demand and the development of innovative solutions based on the use of big data to improve the integrated management of the destination.

Synergies between CCIs and tourism for the green transition

The analysis highlights the relevance of the examined nexus in RIS3 to address environmental challenges through a focus on the development of circular models of production and consumption and the development of environmental sustainability in CCIs and tourism and green destinations. A key case in point is represented by the Abruzzo region (Italy), which has identified relevant priorities dedicated to fashion/design and sustainable mobility and tourism within its updated strategy. The rationale is to promote regional

strengths in the area of design, also in relation to fashion textile design, culture and tourism to support the transition to circularity through the development of eco-design, circular fashion, adaptive reuse of cultural heritage, and sustainable tourism, by means of the integration of logistics and mobility with tourism. In the RIS3 2021–2027 developed by the Italian Sardinia region, a dedicated priority has been indicated that focuses on “Tourism, culture and the environment,” leveraging technological innovation, business model innovation, environmental and social innovation within a holistic approach to valorize and promote the local territorial assets for touristic purposes, also in view of the need to reinforce investments on the sustainability and green transition of destination services. In Friuli-Venezia Giulia (Italy), the specialisation area “Cultural heritage, design, creative industries, tourism” is unpacked into five trajectories including entrepreneurship and technological innovation in CCIs, digital and sustainable innovations to build greener destinations. The latter focuses on the green transformation of the entire tourism value chain, also through the adoption of ecolabels and the development of sustainable tourism, to reduce impacts on the territories and their landscape.

Synergies between CCIs and tourism for the social transition

Long-term sustainability calls for an appropriate balance between the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development. In this perspective, countries/regions’ strategies also demonstrate a primary interest in sustainability and social innovation through innovation in tourism and cultural and creative industries. The cultural and creative sectors are increasingly deployed as a tool for local development and regeneration, while also providing social benefits such as community wellbeing and cohesion.

In particular, the CCIs-tourism nexus intends to promote innovation for wellbeing and social cohesion (e.g., Azores, Kanta-Häme, South East Romania, Tuscany, Sardinia) through a focus on:

- Health tourism, active aging and wellbeing;
- Development of cultural welfare for health and wellbeing;
- Accessible and inclusive services, including education and training, in tourism and heritage.

As a key example, the RIS3 Azores 2022–2027 makes a close reference to the national Portugal 2030 Strategy, which integrates four thematic agendas:

1. People first: a better demographic balance, greater inclusion, less inequality;
2. Digitalization, innovation and capabilities as drivers of development;
3. Climate transition and resource sustainability;

4. An externally competitive and internally cohesive country.

An important aspect of the national strategy is the promotion of tourism related to health and wellbeing. Turismo de Portugal, the Portuguese Health District (HCP), the Investment and Foreign Trade Agency of Portugal (AICEP) and the Portuguese Association of Private Hospitalization (APHP) have signed protocols to highlight the importance of health in Tourism Strategy 2027. In Portugal, medical tourism's potential turnover is calculated at 100 million euros per year. In the hospital and medical tourism context, the Hospital International dos Açores (HIA) stands out, which planned to carry out a medical tourism project. In the field of wellness and health tourism (spa and thalassotherapy), the Azores stand out for their hydrogeological characteristics. Among the transversal areas, the region indicates a series of priorities linked to the population's quality of life and the main social challenges. These proposals mainly focus on topics such as contrast to poverty, the promotion of social integration and development, and of adequate educational programs, intergenerational integration, and the quality/sustainability of the inhabited space. In the Quality of life and social development priority, the following transformative activities are indicated:

- Health tourism, active aging and wellbeing;
- Slow tourism;
- Valuing work and balanced distribution of income;
- Education and training in the area of Tourism and heritage.

The Action Lines promote: the creation of tourist routes certified as "Accessible and inclusive tourism," "Health tourism" and "Wellbeing and tourism"; tourism and leisure practices that promote a better quality of life; tourism and leisure practices that mitigate the gentrification of urban centers; Senior tourism; Slow tourism destinations; entrepreneurship that boosts new segments of tourism (differentiated products and services) with a positive impact on the living conditions of the region, mitigating the effects of seasonality in the area; the strengthening of the acquisition of skills in the area of Tourism and Heritage, including scientific and technological skills in the field of endogenous natural and cultural resources. Another relevant example is represented by the South-East region of Romania, which indicates two specific objectives concerning sustainability and social inclusion:

- Strengthening the role of culture and sustainable tourism in economic development, social inclusion, and social innovation;
- Promoting integrated and inclusive social, economic, and environmental development, as well as culture, natural heritage, sustainable tourism, and security in urban areas.

The priority dedicated to tourism promotes the development of a tourism concept that combines health with recreational activities, based on healthy lifestyle (alternative therapies, healthy food, physical exercise). In particular, it is clearly indicated in the regional program that such objectives can only be achieved through an integrated strategic approach that combines initiatives for the renewal of urban areas, with those concerning environmental protection, development and green mobility, enhancing tourism potential and heritage, through a participatory approach with the involvement of the main local stakeholders.

Evolution of the CCIs-tourism nexus

Finally, the analysis explored whether and how territories have shifted the focus of their Smart Specialisation Strategies as to their consideration of, and emphasis upon, tourism and CCIs. To this end, a comparative analysis of the contents of the programs was conducted and allowed for a comprehensive examination of how regions and countries have shifted their strategic priorities.

An interesting trend identified in the analysis is the general strengthening of the role of CCIs, as several regions in the sample significantly updated their strategies by broadening/re-focusing their priorities and including CCIs dedicated priorities. For instance, the Campania region (IT) added a more robust focus on the Creative industries within the specialisation area "Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Creative Industries," which is defined by the integration of the productive domain of cultural heritage and tourism with the creative industries. This area has been renamed from the previous period to better incorporate the impact of the entire system of CCIs, from cultural heritage to companies producing goods/services closely related to artistic activities with a high creative content, and finally to creative industries that take culture as an input for their core business. Other regions introduced new priorities dedicated to CCIs, as in the cases of the Umbria (IT) priority "Made in Italy, design and creativity" and the Marche (IT) area dedicated to "Products and services for culture and education." Alentejo (PT) doubled the articulations of the integrated priority "Heritage, Cultural and Creative Industry and Services for Tourism," committing to the development of a full-fledged cultural and creative ecosystem. Such change-oriented momentum is also found in regions such as Catalonia (ES), whose vision has shifted towards establishing an integrated cultural system that drives digital and territorial growth and competitiveness. This strategic shift recognizes Cultural and Experience-based Industries as essential services alongside Tourism and Sports, further solidifying the 2014–2020 strategy in this direction. Catalonia's current perspective seeks a holistic social, economic, and environmental development, with culture and natural heritage, sustainable tourism, and non-urban security at its core. Culture is often pinned as a key driver of this process, as a catalyst for

community participation and territorial flourishing. In particular, this is evident in the SmartCatalonia strategy, the Catalan Government's initiative that expands the Smart City concept at the regional scale. The RIS3CAT (the Smart Specialisation Strategy of Catalonia region) extends beyond conventional research and innovation, acknowledging contemporary challenges such as global competition, ageing of populations, climate change, resource scarcity, and immigration. These challenges demand collective responses through social innovation, and culture holds the reins of Catalonia's cross-sectoral actions.

In contrast, it is interesting to highlight that in the Navarra region (ES), the focus on CCIs as a system has been changed in the definition of the already existing priority, and the chosen strategy has narrowed down "Creative and Digital Industries" to "Audiovisual industry," while strengthening "Sustainable tourism." Moreover, two regions, Attica (GR) and Pohjois-Savo (FI), follow an opposite trend, as their strategic priorities as described in Eye@RIS3 shift their center of gravity toward blue and green tourism, actually narrowing the scope of the CCIs within the new seven-year program compared to the previous one where culture was closely related to core tourism strategies.

Discussion

This study provides a preliminary analysis of the role of the CCIs-tourism nexus in smart specialisation, which needs to be extended through a comprehensive analysis of RIS3 in the whole of European regions and countries. It is worth highlighting that almost half of the territories (43%) featured in Eye@RIS3 at the time of the data collection include both tourism-related and CCI-related priorities in their strategies. This finding appears to contradict previous evidence on the marginal representation of tourism and CCIs in smart specialisation strategies during the previous programming period (Weidenfeld, 2018; Stanojevic and Gustafsson, 2021; Meyer et al., 2022).

The thematic analysis highlighted how the prioritization of these domains builds upon a broad conceptualization of innovation, including digital, business, environmental and social dimensions, which is also in line with an evolved approach to the role of CCIs in supporting local growth through multiple crossover effects (Sacco et al., 2018) and the emergence of broader, multisectoral culture-led ecosystems (Borin et al., 2022). While digital innovation prominently characterizes the priorities identified by regions, there is an indication of an integrated approach that leverages the potential of innovation in these domains to pursue a balanced integration of smartness, environmental sustainability and social development of the regional territories/destinations. This is in line with the previous findings by Meyer et al. (2022), who stress CCIs' potential for sustainability and resilience of the tourism

sector in the RIS3 policy nexus as to social, environmental, economic and institutional sustainability.

This study also highlighted a remarkable trend such that many regions have shifted their focus toward CCIs and the broader cultural and creative sector as a priority within their Smart Specialisation Strategy. It recommends further research to explore the impact of these strategic shifts on regional development outcomes. The 2021–2027 programs in various regions have witnessed a strategic realignment, with a growing emphasis on CCIs as key drivers of regional development. This shift underscores the importance of the cultural and creative sectors in shaping the future trajectories of territories and represents a move towards more intelligent and sustainable development strategies.

Conclusion

This study explored the CCIs-tourism nexus in current European RIS3 to provide insights into its representation and role in innovation-led regional development agendas for the triple transition, building on the increased attention paid to CCIs and their interrelationships with tourism within the contemporary theoretical and policy frameworks.

The first limitation of this study is related to its sample, which does not include all the potential European RIS3 strategies. For instance, a previous study on prioritisation in Smart Specialisation in the EU (European Commission, 2021) identified 185 RIS3 strategies at national and/or regional levels across the EU that fulfilled the ex-ante conditionality. In this regard, it has to be noted that previous research on RIS3 mostly relies on the Eye@RIS3 database which was fully upgraded in September 2018 for the previous programming period. For the current programming period, the dedicated online database Eye@RIS3, which was used in this study as a source of data, has not been fully upgraded yet. This limitation of the sample will be addressed in a follow-up of the analysis including all European regions' and countries' strategies for smart specialisation. Further limitations may be related to the translation of texts; indeed, the desk research was complicated due to the lack, in several cases, of an English version of RIS3 documents. Also, the thematic analysis might also benefit from an automated text analysis approach in line with previous mappings (European Commission, 2021).

Despite its limits, the study provides useful theoretical and managerial implications. From the theoretical perspective, it provides a contribution to advancing previous limited research on the relevance and representation of tourism and CCIs in RIS3, substantiating the need for a broader conceptual lens that can adequately take into account the multidimensional nature of innovation and the related outcomes at the territorial level. Whereas a shift has been noticed from more conventional approaches to the interrelation between tourism, culture and creativity, its operational representation in regional strategies for innovation-led development must be taken into account, to better

articulate the paradigm shift found at the theoretical and policy level. The study addresses the challenge of incorporating CCIs into RIS3 to promote the emergence of creative-led ecosystems (Stanojević and Gustafsson, 2021), by providing insights into different choices and approaches by territories to the prioritization of the interrelationship with tourism. It could also support efforts aimed at advancing the conceptualization of innovation in culture and creative industries, which necessarily requires a broader, systemic lens to capture all its dimensions and contributions to the triple transition.

At an operational level, sharing best practices among regions and countries that have successfully incorporated culture and creativity into their strategies and the potentials of interrelation with tourism can contribute to more effective Smart Specialisation Strategies in the future, also in relation to their ongoing evolution towards Smart Sustainable Specialisation Strategies.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusion of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

AM: Conceptualization, methodology, data curation, analysis, writing, review and editing. GL, MT, and SU: Conceptualization, analysis, writing, review and editing. PS: Conceptualization,

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