

Albanian Musical Folklore Heritage and Sustainable Cultural Tourism: Opportunities, Challenges and Strategic Approaches

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Abstract: The preservation and promotion of musical folklore represent universal and enduring themes within cultural heritage studies. Albanian musical folklore is distinguished by a rich diversity of traditional instruments and genres that reflect the country's historical, cultural, and identity-based values. In recent years, the growing demand for authentic tourist experiences has increased the importance of preserving and promoting these traditions, positioning them as valuable assets for attracting visitors interested in experiencing Albania's cultural authenticity. This paper aims to analyze the role of Albanian musical folklore in the development of sustainable cultural tourism. It examines the current state of traditional stringed instruments, the challenges faced by instrumentalists in the context of globalization, and the impact of technological developments on the evolution and preservation of these instruments. The study also seeks to provide recommendations for improving the preservation and promotion of musical folklore in support of sustainable tourism development in Albania. The research methodology combines the analysis of secondary sources with qualitative data collected through interviews with instrumentalists, primarily from northern Albania. The study contributes to the existing literature by conceptualizing musical folklore as a strategic resource for sustainable cultural tourism. It highlights the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage and emphasizes the role of community and institutional involvement. From a practical perspective, the findings offer strategic recommendations for integrating musical folklore into tourism products and destination branding, thereby enhancing cultural identity, competitiveness, and long-term socio-economic development.

Keywords: Sustainable Cultural Tourism, Cultural Heritage Management, Albanian Musical Folklore

1 Introduction

In the age of globalization and increasing competition in the international tourism market, tourist destinations are faced with the need to present themselves with a distinctive identity that distinguishes them from their competitors. In this situation, tourist destinations are increasingly using cultural heritage as a strategic key to create and enhance their identity, to develop and fortify themselves as a genuine and a desirable destination in the world tourist market, [1], [2], [3]. Cultural heritage is more than a relic or monument of the past. It refers to the traditional values, history, , knowledge, collective memory and cultural practices passed down through generations that differentiate a community from others and contribute to building the sense of belonging among its members, becoming the foundation of their cultural identity [4], [2]. Cultural heritage represents a living testament of the creative aspect of human nature and the ability of humans to save and transmit it from generations to generation, giving future generations the same chance to be amazed at the cultural wealth we all have. Cultural heritage is considered as a strategic asset to draw visitors, providing them unique and memorable tourist experiences and helping countries to construct and convey a unique tourist identity in order to compete effectively in the environment of globalization [5], [1], [6]-[7], [3], [8], [9].

Cultural heritage is recognized as the primary source of cultural tourism, which create a unique selling position for the tourist destination in the global tourism market [5], [2], [10], [12]. International studies and reports identify cultural tourism as one of the most important and high-growth potential key segments in global tourism. [5], [11], [1], [2], [6]-[7], [12], [8], [9]. Cultural tourism is a development opportunity for all countries, as they all have their own culture [1], [6], [12], [2]. With successfully managed, cultural tourism is increasingly considered as a driver of sustainable development, as long as offers socio-economic, cultural and environmental benefits to local residents [5], [11], [6], [2], [10], [12]. On the other hand, it promotes national identity while supporting the preservation, vitalization and valorization of cultural heritage [5], [11], [1], [7]. To contribute to the sustainable development of a tourist destination, cultural tourism must be developed in a sustainable manner [11], [2]. Having cultural heritage as its foundation, cultural tourism cannot be developed sustainably without the awareness and engagement of local communities, who play a key role in preserving the authenticity, intergenerational transmission and promotion of cultural heritage that constitutes the basis of tourist attractiveness [5], [11]. Recent studies emphasize the need for sustainable integration of cultural heritage, local communities and tourism activities in order to develop cultural tourism sustainably [3], [11], [12], [10], [13], [15]. In the face of competitive market pressures, this requires appropriate management of cultural heritage, preservation of cultural authenticity, active community participation and use of cultural heritage as a resource for diversification and long-term development of tourist destinations [5], [10], [2], [3]. In this context, cultural

tourism has received more attention both at the level of public policy and in academic research [5], [1], [6] - [7], [12].

The literature points out that the development of cultural tourism has been more focused towards an experiential and meaningful engagement, where visitors are interested in learning, exploring and coming into contact with local traditions and ways of life [5], [11], [1], [6]-[7], [13], [16], [8], [9]. Hence, intangible cultural heritage is now considered as one of the most crucial resources of cultural tourism, in order to enrich the core product of cultural tourism and to generate a 'sense of place' [5], [11], [1], [6]-[7]. In this spirit, traditional musical folklore has an important role in cultural heritage and a lot of potential for the sustainable development of cultural tourism [17], [18]. As an intangible cultural asset, it conveys historical narratives, social values, emotional expressions and collective memory, which are all vital components of cultural and musical identity formation [4]. Therefore, making emotional connections with tourist consumers, also enriching the tourist experience, in by producing a distinctive image, that significantly promotes the distinctive character of the destination, contributing greatly to the differentiation and diversification of the tourist destination [19].

With concentration of tangible and intangible cultural heritage assets, Europe is regarded as the major cultural tourism region in the world [5], [11]. In this point, Albania, as a destination with its rich cultural heritage but not fully promoted at the international level, and also due to its strategic geographical position, has great potential to improve its position as an important destination on the map of cultural tourism [9], [13]. Within this rich cultural heritage, Albanian musical folklore is valuable vector in providing cultural identity and memory of local communities. Albania enjoys a diversity of musical folklore across its geographical regions, which lies firmly embedded in the historical background and traditions and culture of the Albanian people. Despite its cultural and touristic values, the degree of integration of Albanian musical folklore into the tourist offer continues to be relatively low. In order to integrate of musical folklore with tourism, appropriate strategies and sustainable responses need to be designed that reconcile the socio-economic advantages for the local people with the conservation of that cultural base, and the greater significance of tourist value if the tourist offering: (1) the authentic experiences of the visitors but also (2) the competitive advantage in the market for the destination [20]. Intangible cultural heritage is related closely to the communities creating, performing and promoting it; and their continuity and preservation largely rely depend on the invivment and work of these communities [21]. Thus, in order to fully realize the integration of musical folklore in the tourist offer, engagement of local people and instrumentalists, musicians in particular become indispensable, serving as an attachment to traditional folk music and ensuring the long-term development of cultural tourism, which is essential for the promotion of cultural diversity [20]. Just, the community-based tourism models that aim to engage the local community in tourist activities contribute to ensuring authenticity, visitor satisfaction, the competitive advantage of the destination and,

in turn, increase the socio-economic benefits of the tourist destination as well as the local public interest in the protection of intangible cultural heritage [22], [3], [7]. In this light, the valorization of Albanian musical folklore is not limited only to the preservation of culture, but should also be included in activities that support the economic and social development of local communities. The integration of musical folklore is one of the main methods to achieve this objective through the development of cultural tourism that opens up space for the preservation, vitalization and valorization of musical folklore, the active involvement of the community, and the provision of authentic experiences for tourists along with a higher socio-economic well-being of the locality.

Regardless of the growing interest in cultural tourism, Richards [9] notes that that intangible cultural heritage has been relatively understudied, leaving aside its role in the contemporary life of communities and the need for policies that guarantee the sustainability of the practices that keep it alive. Likewise, Bridge [23] pointed out that it is crucial to explore how music can be integrated with tourism as a source of destination development and a mechanism for exploring the role of music in it further. For Albania, little research has been conducted regarding the association between musical folklore and the development of sustainable cultural tourism. This research gap indicates the need of understanding the opportunities, challenges and strategic directions of valuing Albanian musical folklore in the context of sustainable cultural tourism development. Accordingly, our study, seeks to investigate and evaluate the current state of Albanian musical folklore, to analyze the impacts of integrating Albanian musical folklore into the cultural tourism offer, to identify and evaluate strategic approaches to integrating Albanian musical folklore into tourist offers in function of developing sustainable cultural tourism. To achieve this goal, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the current state of Albanian musical folklore?

RQ2: What are the impacts of integrating Albanian musical folklore into the cultural tourism offer?

RQ3. What are the strategic directions for valorizing Albanian musical folklore for the sustainable development of cultural tourism?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Sustainable Cultural Tourism

Tourism has emerged in recent decades an important form for the economic, social and cultural development of destinations. Nevertheless, to guarantee long-term benefits, its development needs to base itself on sustainability principles. World

Tourism Organization (WTO) (24) defines sustainable tourism as development form that assists to satisfy the current needs of tourists and host communities on the one hand and to protects and promote the future opportunities of local populations through wise and responsible management of economic, socio-cultural and environmental assets. Likewise, Swarbrooke (25) contends that sustainable tourism should be economically effective without harming the resources on which future tourism growth is depend. In this regard, sustainability does not reflect a final state, but a continuous process of improvement of development towards sustainable principles for all forms of tourism [26], [25], [27]. Sustainable cultural tourism within this perspective seeks to balance the preservation of cultural heritage with tourism development and the benefit of local communities. It is based on the preservation of cultural values and environmental protection and responsible usage of resources according to the European Association of Historic Towns and Regions (EAHTR) [28], that the active involvement of local communities and stakeholders are provided,, the distribution of economic benefits is fair, the quality experiences for visitors are guaranteed to visitors, while the integrated and flexible management of destinations is realized in the goal of long-term development. Similarly, the European Commission [29] identifies the concept of sustainable cultural tourism as the combined integrated management of cultural heritage and tourism activities with cooperation of local communities that brings long-term economic, social and environmental benefits for all actors and maintains tangible and intangible cultural heritage. By creating links between cultural heritage protection, community participation and local economic development, sustainable cultural tourism is considered an appropriate approach to harmonizing heritage conservation with the long-term development of tourist destinations [29], [11], [2], [30], [31]. SCT is recognized in present studies as an important tool for realization sustainable development objectives, because it can enhance the conservation and cultural asset valorization, local identity strengthening, local host population's development and long-term economic profit accumulation [4], [5], [30], [31], [32].

2.2 Musical folklore and sustainable cultural tourism

The importance of cultural heritage in sustainable development is becoming more evident in the literature today. In this context, Potts [33] contends that cultural heritage is not only a matter of preserving the values of the past but as one of strategic asset needed for long-term development that contributes to the formation of a more sustainable future.. This perspective view indicates that sustainability is a critical determinant for the long-term success of development initiatives on howthe cultural heritage is used as it helps to conserve cultural values, the continuity of traditional practices and the creation of sustainable benefits for local people. As stated by UNWTO [5] tourism and cultural heritage interaction in this regard can make destinations to become sustainable since the main basis of the attractiveness and offer of destinations is the cultural heritage, which is considered to be the source

of cultural tourism. The position of cultural heritage in the development of cultural tourism is present to both its material and intangible elements. Nonetheless, intangible cultural heritage has gained increasing attention in recent years, as an important part of the cultural tourism offer, reflecting increasing demand for authentic cultural experiences among visitors [1], [6] – [7]. Its values lie in its capacity to provide authentic cultural practices, to extend visitors' knowledge for local culture, to rise the uniqueness of destinations in the tourism market, as well as to produce socio-economic benefits for local communities and stakeholders involved in tourism development [4], [6] – [7]. Indeed, the heritage should help to improve and nurture sense of cultural pride and identity and promote the transmission of this heritage between generations, that will help maintain the cultural continuity of communities [4], [21]. In addition, the economic value generated through tourism creates financial opportunities for the preservation and promotion of heritage, as well as raising awareness among communities about the importance of protecting and sustaining this heritage. This importance is also reflected in UNESCO's position expressed in 2003 in the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which considers intangible cultural heritage as a fundamental pillar of cultural diversity and an important factor for sustainable development [4]. However, realizing the long-term benefits from integrating intangible cultural heritage into tourism requires an approach based on the principles of sustainable development. This means preserving the cultural values and authenticity of the heritage, ensuring a balance between tourism promotion and its long-term protection. The World Tourism Organization [35] stresses that intangible cultural heritage can contribute in sustainable cultural tourism development when its cultural values are protected and local communities and tourism actors are actively involved in its preservation and valorization. Intangible cultural heritage as defined by UNESCO [4] is any practice, expression, knowledge skills and representation, together with the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated with them, which make individuals groups and communities, recognize them as part of their cultural heritage.

In this framework, musical folklore is one of the most important forms of intangible cultural heritage, as it reflects the history collective memory, cultural identity and traditional values of local community. Musical folklore signifies the totality of traditional songs, instrumental music, traditional instruments, performance practices and related knowledge with them, which are transmitted from generation to generation and are known by communities as part of their cultural identity [4], [36]. As a kind of intangible cultural heritage, it serves as a carrier of the collective memory, values and cultural traditions of a community. Musical folklore plays an important role in the development of sustainable cultural tourism. So, through songs, traditional instruments and performance practices, it contributes to the preservation and transmission of local culture, strengthening the sense of identity and cultural belonging [18]. Beyond its cultural function, studies on cultural tourism show that traditional music can play an important role in tourism development, creating authentic experiences for visitors, strengthening the image of the destination and

contributing to its differentiation in the tourism market [37], [18], [19], [20]. In the context of sustainable development, the integration of musical folklore into tourism offers can generate socio-economic and cultural benefits for local communities. It can create new sources of income, and support employment for the local community, strengthening their cultural pride [17], [18]. These positive effects encourage the active involvement of local communities in the preservation, interpretation and promotion of musical folklore, which contributes to the continuity of cultural practices and the preservation of their authenticity [21]

However, the literature warns that the use of intangible cultural heritage in tourism must be carefully managed to avoid uncontrolled commodification and loss of authenticity. In an attempt to adapt to market demands, intangible heritage elements can lose their original cultural meaning, function and context, thereby jeopardizing their authenticity and their function as carriers of cultural identity and collective memory [33], [21], [12], [38]. For this reason, UNWTO [35] and UNESCO [34] emphasize the need for policies and approaches to the tourism valorization of intangible cultural heritage that ensure a balance between economic benefits, the preservation of cultural values and the active involvement of local communities. In this context, the valorization of musical folklore through cultural tourism should be based on the principles of sustainability, in order to contribute simultaneously to the preservation of authenticity and the long-term development of the destination and the cultural continuity of local communities. In this way, musical folklore can serve not only as a cultural asset, but also as a strategic resource for the sustainable development of cultural tourism.

2.3 Albanian Musical Folklore

Albanian musical folklore is a very fundamental part of the national intangible culture, which captures the historical experiences, cultural identity and collective memory of Albanian societies. Stemming from centuries-old tradition, it has been transmitted mostly through oral traditions and traditional performance methods, playing an important role in promoting the cultural values of the Albanian nation and consolidating national pride [36], [39]. The tradition of Albanian folk music began with the use of indigenous instruments, most of which were made from natural materials such as wood, reed, stone and animal resources [40]. An important characteristic of Albanian musical folklore is the variety of traditional instruments, including the lute, *çiftelinë*, *sharkinë*, *bakllamajen*, *llauten* and instrumental ensembles known as *saze*. These instruments are closely linked to specific geographical regions and musical traditions and are part of the rich and diverse cultural folklore of Albania [41], [40]. In particular, the lute is of great interest due to its historical connections with the performance of heroic epics and the preservation of collective memories, especially in the northern regions of Albania [42]. The contribution of Albanian musical folklore to Albanian cultural heritage gained international recognition in 2025 when the “Art of Playing, Singing and

Making the Lute” was inscribed on the UNESCO List of “Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding” [43]. This international recognition concerns not only the instrument itself, but also the traditional knowledge and practices used in the construction of the instrument, the way it is performed, and the singing of Albanian heroic epic songs, recognizing the role of the lute as an essential aspect/factor of cultural identity, collective and intergenerational transmission of Albanian musical traditions. Albanian musical folklore is still transmitted mainly through family and community events, cultural celebrations, festivals and other traditional events, thus transmitting musical knowledge and skills between generations [43], [42], [40], which help not only in preserving musical traditions, but also in motivating younger generations to study and practice traditional music. The authenticity, cultural significance and regional diversity of Albanian musical folklore offer many opportunities for the development of cultural tourism. This can be a means by which traditional music can enhance visitors’ experiences and evoke a sense of destination and can contribute to the formulation of indigenous cultural tourism products. However, the sustainability of these traditions depends on the preservation of musical repertoires, musical instruments and performance strategies. Therefore, the inclusion of Albanian musical folklore in tourism projects should adhere to the theory of sustainable development by focusing on promoting tourism and economic success for the community, as well as preserving culture for future generations.

3 Research methodology

This study uses a combined research approach, which integrates the analysis of secondary sources with empirical research to provide a more complete understanding of the research questions regarding the current state of Albanian musical folklore, its role in the development of cultural tourism, and directions for its valorization for sustainable cultural tourism development. This research approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the research issue and increases the reliability of the study results [44]. The theoretical part of the study is based on the analysis of scientific literature on intangible cultural heritage, musical folklore, and sustainable cultural tourism. Special attention was paid to the exploration of Albanian musical folklore and traditional stringed instruments. The literature review highlighted that, although studies on cultural heritage and cultural tourism exist, research that specifically addresses Albanian musical folklore in the context of tourism remains limited, highlighting the need for further empirical research. To address this gap in the literature, the study uses a qualitative approach to empirical research. Qualitative research is considered appropriate when it aims to understand the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of individuals related to a particular phenomenon [44]. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the limited availability of previous research on this topic, a qualitative approach was

considered the most appropriate method to gain in-depth insights into the perspectives of individuals directly involved in the preservation and transmission of Albanian musical folklore. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect primary data. This method offers sufficient flexibility to explore participants' perspectives in more depth than standard quantitative methods, while maintaining a focus on the study objectives [45].

The sample in the study consists of ten Albanian folk music instrumentalists from northern Albania, who are performers of traditional stringed instruments. The selection of instrumentalists was considered particularly important, as they represent direct bearers of intangible cultural heritage and possess authentic knowledge on the current state, challenges and potential of Albanian folk music and possible strategies for its valorization for sustainable cultural tourism. They were selected purposively (purposive sampling) on the basis of their experience, active involvement in folk music practices and their recognized role in the preservation and transmission of musical tradition. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research when participants with the necessary information are asked to provide detailed knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation [44]. Each interview lasted 30-40 minutes and was conducted face-to-face. To ensure the privacy of the participants and confidentiality of the data, the interview participants were coded. The data collected from the interviews were analyzed through the thematic analysis of Brawn and Clarke [46], which involves familiarizing themselves with the interview information by repeatedly reading it, coding key information, and grouping the codes into themes related to the research questions. The analysis focused on the perception of instrumentalists on the current assessment of Albanian musical folklore, its role in the development of cultural tourism, as well as strategic directions for its valorization in function of the development of sustainable cultural tourism.

This study presents some limitations related to the small sample size and the focus only on instrumentalists of stringed instruments of musical folklore of Northern Albania. Consequently, the results should be interpreted in the context of the studied group. However, the qualitative nature of the research and the experience of the participants enabled the collection of in-depth information on the potential and challenges of valorization of Albanian musical folklore for the sustainable development of cultural tourism.

4 Research Analysis and Findings

The research analysis and findings from the interviews of Albanian musical folklore instrumentalists are structured around three main themes related to the study's objectives: the current state of Albanian musical folklore, the advantages of its

integration into the cultural tourism offer and strategies for its valorization in support of the sustainable development of cultural tourism.

4.1 Current state of Albanian musical folklore

The analysis of the interviews shows that Albanian musical folklore is considered one of the most real expressions of the intangible cultural heritage of their country, rich in regional characteristics and with specific types of interpretation that reflect the cultural identity of the community. They believed that such cultural wealth constitutes an important value not only for the preservation of musical traditions, but also for the promotion of Albanian cultural identity. However, the interviewees were of the opinion that Albanian musical traditions are subject to several problems in their survival and development. The main concern was related to the limited financial and institutional support for traditional musical instrumentalists/activities. According to participants, the lack of sustainable support programs makes it difficult to preserve, promote and transmit this heritage to future generations. Another issue raised in the interviews is the consequences that modernization and globalization have on traditional music practices. Instrumentalists emphasized that the increasing dominance of contemporary music and digital platforms has contributed to the decline of public interest, especially among young people, in traditional instruments and repertoire. According to them, traditional instruments are often perceived as elements of the past, making it more difficult to involve younger generations in learning and practicing them. Interviewees stated that the economic aspect constitutes a critical issue for the continuity of musical folklore. Most participants stated that current traditional musical activities do not provide instrumentalists with sufficient and sustainable income. Therefore, one consequence for ordinary people is that many of them have to return to their other professions to make a living, reducing their time and opportunity to dedicate themselves to the preservation and transmission of an ancient musical heritage. An issue highlighted by instrumentalists is related to the way Albanian musical folklore is commercialized. The way in which traditional musical repertoire has been revised to meet market needs also, they say, risks losing its authenticity and the sense of cultural values that accompany it. According to instrumentalists, protecting the authenticity of the musical repertoire, interpretive practices and traditional instruments is a prerequisite for the long-term preservation of this heritage and for its sustainable valorization in the cultural tourism offer.

4.2 Impacts of integrating Albanian musical folklore into the cultural tourism offer

The analysis of the interviews shows that the instrumentalists see Albanian musical folklore as a sustainable resource for the development of cultural tourism. Its integration into the tourist offer can be very useful in many areas, benefiting the improvement of the tourist experience and the local economy, as well as the empowerment of the community and the long-term preservation of cultural heritage. The main benefit highlighted by the interviewees relates to the potential of musical folklore to create authentic and experiential tourist experiences. According to the instrumentalists, contemporary tourists increasingly seek experiences related to local culture or traditions, and traditional musical performances offer avenues for direct contact with the local community. Thus, musical folklore helps to make the tourist offer distinctive and to strengthen the cultural identity of the country. An additional theme highlighted in the interviews is that of the economic effects that come from the integration of musical folklore into the tourist offer. The promotion of traditional music is also considered a good way to help artists, organizers of cultural activities and local communities by contributing to an additional source of income for them. Furthermore, tourism products that rely on musical folklore, by bringing in a tourist market, can provide employment opportunities and economic benefits for the entire local economy and local community, especially small businesses in rural parts of the country with a rich musical heritage. They emphasized that musical folklore also contributes to the empowerment of the local community and ensuring the cultural identity of local people. The integration of traditional music in the tourism offer opens up opportunities for the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and practices and engages young people in local musical traditions, according to the instrumentalists. Also, the promotion of specific musical traditions in geographical areas can contribute to a more equitable distribution of tourism benefits and the development of less prominent tourist areas. A recurring aspect of the participants in the discussion was that the development of cultural tourism will provide economic incentives for the preservation and promotion of musical folklore. In their opinion, the growing interest of tourists in authentic local experiential experiences facilitates investments in the preservation of the tradition in music, the repair and hand-making of traditional musical instruments, as well as the coordination of festivals, cultural events and educational activities. In this way, tourism can vitalize traditional practices that are at risk. On another point, in addition to the economic and cultural, some instrumentalists emphasized that tourism using musical folklore tends to attract a segment of tourists who seek an authentic experience with a relatively low impact on the environment. They also found that the promotion of musical folklore can strengthen cultural exchanges, improve the international image of Albania by contributing to the recognition of the country as a destination with a unique cultural identity.

4.3 Strategies for the valorization of Albanian musical folklore in support of the sustainable development of cultural tourism

The analysis of the interviews reveals that instrumentalists believe that it is necessary to formulate an integrated approach to the valorization of Albanian musical folklore that combines the preservation of the cultural heritage of the region and also the sustainable growth of cultural tourism. The preservation and dissemination of musical folklore cannot be reduced to artistic performances alone, they argue; this should be supported through education, documentation, inter-institutional cooperation and the active engagement of local communities. One of the most frequently cited strategic directions by the interviewees involves the transmission of traditional musical knowledge between generations. Instrumentalists support the introduction of folk music for young people in educational programs, the development of courses, trainings and live events with traditional music and the provision of scholarships for young people who attend these training courses, and who perform with folk instruments at cultural events, in order to preserve the tradition and increase interest in traditional musical instruments among young people. Education is one of the most promising methods to keep the Albanian musical tradition alive, they say. However, the interviewees also emphasized the focus on the structured study and documentation of Albanian musical folklore. It is vital to collect oral testimonies, record and publish traditional musical repertoires, document the techniques of interpretation and production of folk musical instruments, as well as create digital archives accessible to researchers and the public, the participants emphasized. The expansion of research and documentation projects on the historical, cultural and social aspects of musical folklore and the financial support from the relevant institutions, not only contributes to the promotion of these cultural practices on a global and national level, but also to the protection of authenticity, guaranteeing the sustainability of this tradition and minimizing the risk of excessive commercialization. The analysis of the interviews also reveals that instrumentalists prioritize the formation of partnerships and collaborations in the field of cultural tourism. They recommend increasing cooperation between cultural institutions, local communities, artists and tourism operators, as well as the creation of interregional and cross-border collaborative projects. Based on this information, the development of cultural itineraries between regions within the country and those bordering Albanian ethnicity should be an important factor that helps generate the diversity of Albanian musical folklore and enrich the overall travel experience of tourists. An important theme raised in these interviews is the active participation of local communities in the development of cultural tourism. The instrumentalists understood the vital roles that communities play in preserving, interpreting and promoting musical folklore, as the main bearers of this tradition. Community participation in planning cultural and tourism activities is not only a way to create more authentic tourism experiences, but also increases the socio-economic benefits to the community from tourism activities, according to

their views. Meanwhile, participants said that it is important for tourism operators to make more extensive use of musical folklore in the products and activities they offer. Some also recommended creating opportunities for regular participation of folk artists within cultural and tourist activities, and with performances in bars and restaurants, to create a more sustainable income stream and a potential role for these artists to continue to promote cultural heritage. Respondents also stressed the importance of good interpretation and presentation of musical folklore to tourists. They argue, for example, that more modern types of cultural communication, including interactive exhibitions and multimedia presentations, interpretive guides, and participatory activities, can be used to deepen the appreciation and understanding of the historical and cultural content of traditional music, which can contribute to tourists' learning about the tradition of traditional music. In addition, designing participatory activities that promote engagement, through performances, workshops or community-based activities, can result in an effective form of real and meaningful connections between tourists and local culture. Last but not least, the instrumentalists also argue that musical folklore should be integrated into the tourism promotion of the regions and of all of Albania through integration into cultural itineraries, tourist activities, festivals and promotional activities. They stated that the inclusion of musical folklore as part of national and local cultural tourism strategies and programs, and the participation of locals, as bearers of musical folklore, in the drafting of these strategies, would make this heritage more visible, the strategies more feasible and new economic opportunities would be created for locals. Taken together, the instrumentalists believe that the realization of these strategies will depend on the support of public institutions. Public policy should develop permanent support mechanisms for the education, documentation and dissemination and further integration of musical folklore into the cultural tourism offer, according to them. Therefore, in such a context, they emphasized the financing of cultural activities; the support of artists and producers of traditional instruments; scientific research; and better cooperation between cultural institutions and local communities, as well as the tourism sector. As the interviewees emphasized, only through a coordinated system of policies, institutions, support measures and cooperation between stakeholders can the preservation and intergenerational transmission of Albanian musical folklore be ensured, transforming it into a sustainable resource for long-term development of cultural tourism.

Conclusions

This study aimed to analyze the current state of Albanian musical folklore, the advantages of its integration into the cultural tourism offer and the strategic directions for its valorization in the function of sustainable cultural tourism. The results of the study show that Albanian musical folklore represents an important component of the country's intangible cultural heritage, characterized by special historical, artistic and identity values. However, its continuity faces challenges related to limited institutional support, the declining interest of younger generations,

the economic sustainability of artists and the risk of losing the authenticity of traditional practices. The study also highlights that the integration of Albanian musical folklore into the cultural tourism offer can contribute to the creation of authentic experiences for visitors, the differentiation of tourist destinations, the generation of economic benefits for local communities and the strengthening of the processes of preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. In this sense, musical folklore presents considerable potential to become an important source of sustainable development of cultural tourism in Albania. The findings show that the sustainable valorization of musical folklore requires an integrated approach that combines education and intergenerational transmission of knowledge, documentation and scientific research, the active involvement of local communities, cooperation between cultural institutions and the tourism sector, as well as sustainable institutional support mechanisms. Only through such an approach can the preservation of the authenticity of this heritage be ensured, its continuity between generations strengthened and its potential for the long-term development of cultural tourism utilized.

Despite the results achieved, the study presents some limitations related to the limited sample size and the focus only on musical folklore instrumentalists of northern Albania. For this reason, future studies may include other bearers of folk music, tourism actors, and other regions of the country, with the aim of creating a more comprehensive understanding of the role of Albanian musical folklore in the development of sustainable cultural tourism

Theoretical and practical implications

The research addresses some theoretical and practical implications for the fields of cultural heritage, tourism research and sustainable development. Theoretically, it enriches the existing literature on intangible cultural heritage and sustainable cultural tourism by linking Albanian musical folklore and tourism development. In pursuit of this goal, this study contributes to the debates on the importance of folkloric musical heritage for tourism as a cultural asset with potential for the development of tourist destinations, as it contributes to building and promoting the identity of the destination, strengthening the connection of the community with the place, attracting tourists interested in authentic experiential tourism experiences and supporting the sustainable development of cultural tourism. Furthermore, this research enriches the discourse on the valorization of cultural heritage by addressing the delicate balance between preservation and commercialization. It underlines the necessity of preserving authenticity by including traditional musical practices in tourist offers. Focusing on a less studied issue of the valuation of Albanian musical folklore in the sustainable development of cultural tourism, the article positions Albanian musical folklore as a strategic resource rather than an expression of cultural memory and traditional artistic heritage. Most importantly, this study adds importance to the academic discourse on this topic by promoting instrumentalists' understandings of community-based tourism theory positioning instrumentalists as key actors in the preservation, provision and promotion of musical folklore [47], [48].

On a practical level, this research has useful lessons for local policymakers, tourism planners, cultural organizations and community development institutions as we strive to find effective ways to preserve and protect Albanian musical folklore as a resource for the sustainable development of the cultural tourism industry. The results suggest approaches and guidelines for developing sustainable policies that integrate the protection or preservation of cultural heritage with the development of an authentic tourism experience. These can help create sustainable tourism products, ranging from traditional music festivals, cultural routes, heritage workshops and brand development focused on traditional music, strengthening Albania's position in the cultural tourism industry, local economies and encouraging community involvement. Furthermore, community participation, cultural education programs and mutual cooperation between stakeholders are considered key elements of the sustainable use of musical folklore in the tourism offer. In addition, this study provides strategic suggestions for increasing the popularity of Albanian musical folklore through sustainable tourism development strategies that specifically aim to promote the preservation of cultural heritage, improve the competitiveness of the destination and promote the socio-economic development of local communities

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