

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL OF CREATIVE TOURISM IN AZERBAIJAN AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ITS ECONOMIC-GEOGRAPHICAL ORGANIZATION

Sayali S. Jalilova

Baku State University, 33, Z. Khalilov str. AZ 1148 Baku, Azerbaijan

<https://doi.org/10.30546/209805.2026.3.2.3056>

Abstract

Creative tourism, as an advanced and participatory dimension of the global creative economy, has emerged as a significant instrument for regional development and the territorial redistribution of economic activity. This article examines the regional development potential of creative tourism in Azerbaijan and proposes methodological foundations for its economic-geographical organization. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Richards (2011, 2020), Porter (1990), Hall and Williams (2019), and UNWTO (2018) guidelines, the study employs comparative regional analysis, functional-structural analysis, and conceptual modeling to assess the spatial differentiation of creative tourism resources across Azerbaijan's principal economic regions. The analysis demonstrates that Azerbaijan possesses a layered and territorially diverse portfolio of creative tourism resources, including UNESCO-recognized intangible heritage assets, traditional craft industries, performing arts traditions, and culturally embedded gastronomy, yet their regional distribution is characterized by marked spatial asymmetry. Absheron and the greater Baku metropolitan area retain a disproportionate concentration of creative tourism infrastructure, while the Karabakh Economic Zone and East Zangezur regions, despite their exceptional heritage density, remain structurally underdeveloped in terms of creative economy activation. A conceptual territorial model is developed that delineates four functional cluster zones, articulates the cause-and-effect relationships governing creative tourism development, and provides actionable policy implications for spatially balanced growth. The findings indicate that a cluster-based, governance-coordinated approach to creative tourism organization constitutes the most effective pathway for addressing regional disparities and achieving sustainable territorial development.

Keywords: *creative tourism; creative economy; economic geography; territorial clusters; spatial organization*

*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sayali.jalilova@gmail.com (S. Jalilova)

ORCID: 0009-0008-7657-6176

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between culture, creativity, and territorial development has gained increasing importance in regional development theory over the past three decades. As traditional industrial sectors have gradually lost their dominant role in shaping regional economic differentiation, cultural assets,

creative industries, and knowledge-based services have become significant drivers of regional competitiveness [4]. Within this context, creative tourism — defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization as tourism that enables visitors to actively participate in the cultural life of local communities through interactive and educational experiences [13] — represents one of the most territorially embedded expressions of the creative economy.

Azerbaijan occupies a distinctive position in this emerging landscape. As a post-Soviet transitional economy with a diverse cultural heritage, the country integrates historical Silk Road traditions, UNESCO-recognized Mugham music, carpet weaving culture, and growing creative industries into a development context shaped by post-oil economic diversification. National policy frameworks, including the State Programme on the Development of Tourism (2023–2027), emphasize the role of tourism and creative industries in supporting regional economic development and diversification [6]. However, despite this policy emphasis, the spatial organization and territorial integration of creative tourism remain insufficiently examined.

The reconstruction and reintegration of the Karabakh Economic Zone and East Zangezur following the Second Karabakh War (2020) have further intensified the relevance of creative tourism for regional development. These territories, including the historically significant city of Shusha — designated as the Cultural Capital of Azerbaijan — possess substantial cultural and historical resources. At the same time, post-conflict infrastructure limitations and institutional reconstruction challenges require more systematic and spatially informed approaches to tourism development.

Against this background, this study pursues three analytical objectives. First, it conceptualizes creative tourism within the broader framework of the creative economy. Second, it applies an economic-geographical perspective, including spatial organization theory and cluster approaches, to evaluate the regional distribution of creative tourism resources in Azerbaijan. Third, it proposes a conceptual model of creative tourism territorial organization aimed at supporting more balanced regional tourism development.

Despite the growing international literature on creative tourism, limited research has examined its spatial organization and regional development implications in post-transition economies. In Azerbaijan, existing studies largely focus on cultural tourism and heritage management, while the territorial structure of creative tourism remains insufficiently explored. Therefore, this study analyzes the spatial distribution of creative tourism resources and develops a conceptual framework for their economic-geographical organization.

Literature Review

Creative Tourism in the Creative Economy Framework

The scholarly conceptualization of creative tourism is most comprehensively associated with the work of Greg Richards, whose foundational 2011 article established creative tourism as a qualitatively distinct tourism modality that prioritizes the co-creation of cultural experiences over passive consumption [9]. For Richards, creative tourism is not merely a niche product but a structural expression of the broader shift within postmodern tourism economies toward authenticity-seeking, skill acquisition, and participatory cultural engagement. This conceptual architecture was further elaborated in Richards (2020), where the author positioned creative tourism within an ecosystemic framework of creative place-making, arguing that the creative tourist functions simultaneously as a consumer, co-producer, and cultural ambassador, thereby generating spillover effects that extend beyond narrow tourism economic metrics [10].

The OECD (2019) report on tourism and the creative economy provides the most comprehensive cross-national policy analysis of the relationship between creative industries and tourism development, establishing that destinations with well-integrated creative economy ecosystems demonstrate measurably superior tourism performance across multiple indicators including visitor expenditure, length of stay, and geographic dispersal away from primary destinations [6]. This finding carries particular significance for Azerbaijan, where creative tourism policy has thus far been concentrated in the Absheron peninsula and Baku's historic core, generating a structural spatial imbalance that the present study seeks to analyze and address.

Regional Development and Creative Industries

The economic-geographical study of creative industries and regional development has been substantially shaped by Porter's (1990) cluster theory, which identifies the co-location of specialized firms, institutions, and human capital as the primary mechanism for generating sustainable competitive advantage in any given territory [7]. Porter's framework, while originally developed in the context of manufacturing industries, has been successfully applied to creative sector spatial organization, where cluster dynamics generate not only productive efficiencies but also the cultural knowledge spillovers that constitute the distinctive value-creation logic of creative tourism [4].

Hall and Williams (2019) extend this cluster-based perspective by emphasizing the role of governance architecture in mediating the translation of creative resource endowments into functional regional development outcomes. Their comparative study of European cultural tourism regions demonstrates that resource abundance alone is insufficient to generate regional economic dynamism; rather, the institutional capacity to organize, connect, and promote creative assets within a spatially coherent territorial system determines developmental outcomes [4]. This governance-centered perspective is directly applicable to the Azerbaijani context, where the institutional landscape for creative tourism remains fragmented across multiple ministries and agencies without a unified territorial coordination mechanism.

Territorial Systems and Spatial Organization

The spatial organization of tourism has been analyzed through the lens of territorial systems theory, which conceptualizes tourism regions as complex adaptive systems comprising resource nodes, connectivity networks, institutional structures, and demand-side flows [13]. Within this framework, the developmental trajectory of any given tourism territory is determined by the interplay between endogenous resource quality, exogenous market demand, and the structural conditions — including infrastructure, governance, and human capital — that mediate their interaction. Applied to creative tourism, this framework emphasizes the importance of spatial connectivity between creative resource nodes, the density of inter-actor networks, and the alignment between territorial branding and authentic creative identity.

Azerbaijan's economic-geographical structure presents a distinctive configuration of territorial systems that both enables and constrains creative tourism development. The pronounced centralization of institutional, infrastructural, and financial capital in the Absheron peninsula stands in marked contrast to the peripheral and semi-peripheral character of the country's interior and southern regions. Previous academic work on Azerbaijan's tourism geography, though limited, has noted this spatial concentration and called for territorial diversification strategies [6]. The present study advances this literature by providing a systematic analytical framework for evaluating regional creative tourism potential and prescribing spatially differentiated development interventions.

Methodology

This study employs a multi-method qualitative-quantitative research design that integrates four principal analytical approaches: comparative regional analysis, functional-structural analysis, territorial systems analysis, and conceptual modeling. The methodological pluralism is appropriate given the dual objective of empirically characterizing the differentiated distribution of creative tourism potential across Azerbaijani regions and constructing a theoretically grounded conceptual model of territorial organization.

The comparative regional analysis proceeds through the construction of a multi-dimensional regional scoring framework that evaluates eight of Azerbaijan's principal economic and administrative regions — Absheron, Sheki-Zagatala, Karabakh Economic Zone, East Zangezur, Ganja-Dashkasan, Lankaran-Astara, Shamakhi-Ismailli, Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, and Aran (Shirvan lowlands) — across five evaluative dimensions: heritage resource density, creative infrastructure index, accessibility and connectivity index, economic development index, and current policy priority status. Scoring on a standardized 1–10 scale was performed through triangulated secondary source analysis drawing on OECD (2019) country data, UNWTO (2018) statistical annexes, Azerbaijan State Statistics Committee regional data (2022–2023), and UNESCO cultural heritage documentation. The resulting composite scores provide the empirical basis for the regional differentiation analysis presented in Table 2 and Figure 1.

Functional-structural analysis was applied to decompose the Azerbaijan creative tourism system into its constituent structural elements — resources, actors, infrastructure, and governance mechanisms — and to identify the functional relationships and hierarchical dependencies among them. This analytical approach, grounded in the systems-geographical tradition developed by Russian and Soviet economic geographers and adapted for post-Soviet transitional contexts, is particularly suited to Azerbaijan's territorial configuration, where the functional connections between the Baku metropolitan core and peripheral creative tourism zones remain weak and institutionally underdeveloped.

The classification of creative tourism resources in Table 1 was developed through synthesis of Richards's [9] resource taxonomy, the UNWTO [13] typology of creative tourism products, and original contextual adaptation to Azerbaijan's specific cultural geography. Resource categories were cross-validated against UNESCO documentation, Azerbaijan Ministry of Culture strategic plans, and OECD (2019) creative economy assessments. The conceptual model presented in Figure 2 was constructed through iterative application of Porter's [7] competitive cluster framework, Hall and Williams's [4] governance architecture principles, and the territorial systems model derived from UNWTO [13].

Results and Discussion

The Creative Tourism Resource Base of Azerbaijan: Classification and Distribution

Azerbaijan's creative tourism resource base is both exceptionally rich and spatially heterogeneous. As shown in Table 1, the resource taxonomy encompasses six principal categories: cultural-heritage assets (both tangible and intangible), craft and applied arts traditions, performing arts and music, gastronomy and agri-food culture, natural-cultural landscapes, and creative industries infrastructure. Each category contains sub-types with distinct economic-geographical properties that determine their capacity for creative tourism product development.

Table 1.
Classification of Creative Tourism Resources in Azerbaijan

<i>Resource Category</i>	<i>Subcategory</i>	<i>Regional Examples</i>	<i>Creative Tourism Value</i>
Cultural-Heritage	<i>Tangible Heritage</i>	<i>Icherisheher (Baku), Shusha Old Town, Sheki Khan Palace</i>	<i>Architectural interpretation, historical craft workshops</i>
	<i>Intangible Heritage</i>	<i>Mugham music, Ashiq tradition, Azerbaijani carpet weaving</i>	<i>Participatory learning, master-apprentice experiences</i>

Craft & Applied Arts	<i>Traditional Craft</i>	<i>Sheki silk weaving, Guba carpet production, Lahij copperwork</i>	<i>Hands-on craft production, artisan co-creation</i>
	<i>Contemporary Applied Arts</i>	<i>Baku design studios, Nakhchivan ceramic traditions</i>	<i>Design-thinking workshops, creative enterprise incubation</i>
Performing Arts & Music	<i>Classical Performing Arts</i>	<i>Shusha Mugham Festival, Baku International Music Festival</i>	<i>Participatory performance, musical immersion programs</i>
	<i>Folk Performance</i>	<i>Novruz theatrical traditions, regional folk dance</i>	<i>Cultural co-production, ethnographic immersion</i>
Gastronomy & Agri-food	<i>Culinary Heritage</i>	<i>Lankaran sub-tropical cuisine, Sheki pakhlava, Ganja viticulture</i>	<i>Culinary tourism, farm-to-table creative experiences</i>
	<i>Agro-tourism Landscapes</i>	<i>Karabakh lowland agriculture, Shamakhi saffron production</i>	<i>Rural creative immersion, sustainable agri-tourism</i>
Natural-Cultural Landscape	<i>Geocultural Sites</i>	<i>Gobustan rock art, Yanar Dag, Mud Volcanoes</i>	<i>Geotourism interpretation, environmental art workshops</i>
	<i>Mountainous Cultural Landscapes</i>	<i>Lahij mountain village, Xinaliq highland community</i>	<i>Ethno-ecological tourism, indigenous knowledge exchange</i>
Creative Industries Infrastructure	<i>Creative Hubs & Spaces</i>	<i>YARAT Contemporary Art Space (Baku), Nizami Ganjavi Museum</i>	<i>Contemporary art residencies, innovation co-working experiences</i>

Source: Author's elaboration based on Richards (2011, pp. 1241–1245); UNWTO (2018, pp. 18–24); Azerbaijan Ministry of Culture (2023)

The data presented in Table 1 reveals that the most distinctive dimension of Azerbaijan's creative tourism resource portfolio is the combination of UNESCO-recognized intangible heritage assets with tangible architectural heritage of exceptional quality and geographic breadth. Mugham music and Azerbaijani carpet weaving — both inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity — represent anchor resources with significant international tourism appeal that transcend their specific locational contexts. However, the geographic distribution of these resources across the national territory is highly uneven. Intangible heritage resources, particularly performing arts and traditional craft traditions, retain their strongest living practice communities in the interior regions of Sheki-Zagatala, Guba-Khachmaz, Karabakh, and the mountainous communities of Lahij and Xinaliq, rather than in the Absheron metropolitan core where tourism infrastructure is most developed.

This spatial mismatch between resource location and infrastructure concentration constitutes the fundamental structural tension that any effective creative tourism development strategy for Azerbaijan must resolve. The craft and gastronomy categories are particularly illustrative of this dynamic: Sheki's silk weaving and pakhlava culinary tradition, Guba's carpet production, Lahij's coppersmithing, and Lankaran's distinctive sub-tropical culinary heritage are geographically distributed across a wide arc of the national territory. These are not residual or static heritage assets but living creative practices embedded in functioning artisan communities that possess the capacity for authentic creative tourism co-production if appropriately supported through infrastructure investment, institutional development, and market connectivity.

Regional Differentiation of Creative Tourism Potential

The regional differentiation analysis reveals a pronounced hierarchy of creative tourism potential that corresponds broadly to, but is not fully explained by, the existing spatial distribution of economic development and tourism infrastructure. As demonstrated in Table 2, the composite creative tourism potential score varies from a maximum of 9.1 (Absheron) to a minimum of 5.2 (Aran/Shirvan lowlands),

with a standard deviation that indicates high inter-regional variance. This level of spatial asymmetry is analytically significant because it points to structural constraints — inadequate infrastructure, weak institutional capacity, and limited market connectivity — rather than resource deficiency as the binding limitation on creative tourism development in peripheral regions.

Table 2.
Regional Differentiation of Creative Tourism Potential in Azerbaijan

<i>Region</i>	<i>Heritage Score (1–10)</i>	<i>Creative Infra. Index</i>	<i>Accessibility Index</i>	<i>Econ. Dev. Index</i>	<i>Policy Priority</i>	<i>Overall CT Potential</i>
<i>Absheron (Baku Metro)</i>	9.2	8.8	9.5	9.0	<i>High</i>	Very High (Leader)
<i>Sheki-Zagatala</i>	8.5	5.9	6.8	5.5	<i>High</i>	High (Core Zone)
<i>Karabakh Economic Zone</i>	9.0	3.5	4.2	3.8	<i>Critical</i>	High-Emerging (Priority)
<i>East Zangezur</i>	8.2	2.8	3.5	2.9	<i>Critical</i>	High-Emerging (Priority)
<i>Ganja-Dashkasan</i>	7.8	5.2	7.1	5.8	<i>Medium</i>	Medium-High (Growth)
<i>Lankaran-Astara</i>	7.2	4.1	6.3	4.9	<i>Medium</i>	Medium (Developing)
<i>Shamakhi-Ismailli</i>	7.5	3.8	6.5	4.5	<i>Medium</i>	Medium (Developing)
<i>Nakhchivan AR</i>	7.0	3.2	3.0	4.2	<i>Medium</i>	Medium (Constrained)
<i>Aran (Shirvan Lowlands)</i>	5.8	3.0	7.0	5.5	<i>Low</i>	Low-Medium (Latent)

Source: Author's elaboration based on OECD (2019, pp. 88–95); UNWTO (2018); Azerbaijan State Statistics Committee (2023); UNESCO (2022)

Table 2 identifies several regions of particular analytical interest. The Karabakh Economic Zone presents the most acute case of resource-infrastructure divergence in the national creative tourism landscape. With a heritage score of 9.0 — reflecting the extraordinary cultural significance of Shusha, Agdam, and the broader Karabakh historical landscape — this region ranks second only to Absheron in resource endowment. However, its creative infrastructure index of 3.5, accessibility index of 4.2, and economic development index of 3.8 reflect the profound structural legacy of three decades of territorial displacement and infrastructure destruction. The post-2020 reconstruction program represents an unprecedented window of opportunity for embedding creative tourism as a foundational element of the region's economic architecture, provided that policy design is informed by best-practice creative economy principles rather than conventional mass tourism development models.

East Zangezur presents an analogous but geographically even more peripheral case, with a heritage score of 8.2 that reflects the region's rich Karabakh-adjacent cultural traditions, combined with infrastructure indices that reflect its exceptional development deficit. Sheki-Zagatala, by contrast, represents the most mature case of an interior region that has successfully developed creative tourism infrastructure around its outstanding heritage base — the Sheki Khan Palace (a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2019), the silk weaving tradition, and a distinctive culinary culture. Sheki-Zagatala's creative infrastructure index of 5.9 and heritage score of 8.5 position it as the most developed creative tourism cluster outside the Baku metropolitan area and as an important model for interior regional development strategy.

Spatial Distribution and Regional Comparative Indicators

Figure 1 presents the regional distribution of composite creative tourism potential scores across Azerbaijan's nine principal economic regions, providing a visual synthesis of the multi-dimensional regional differentiation documented in Table 2.

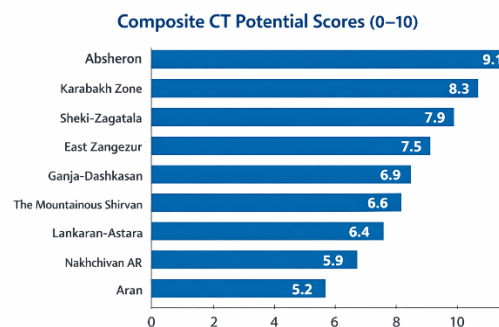


Figure 1. Regional Distribution of Composite Creative Tourism Potential Scores in Azerbaijan

Source: Author's elaboration based on Table 2 data (composite weighted score: heritage 30%, creative infrastructure 25%, accessibility 20%, economic development 15%, policy priority 10%)

The bar chart in Figure 1 makes visible the structural architecture of Azerbaijan's creative tourism potential landscape with analytical clarity. Three distinct tiers of development potential emerge from the data. The first tier, comprising Absheron (9.1) and the Karabakh Economic Zone (8.3), represents the two poles of Azerbaijan's creative tourism future: the former as the established metropolitan innovation core, the latter as the most strategically significant emerging destination in the national development agenda. The second tier — Sheki-Zagatala (7.9) and East Zangezur (7.5) — comprises regions that combine high heritage endowment with intermediate or low infrastructure capacity, making them the primary targets for medium-term creative tourism cluster development investment. The third tier — Ganja-Dashkasan, Shamakhi-Ismailli, Lankaran-Astara, and Nakhchivan — represents regions where creative tourism development potential is real but constrained by a combination of infrastructure deficits, market distance, and institutional capacity limitations that require longer-horizon investment and governance development.

The gap between Absheron's score and those of peripheral regions is not simply a reflection of resource or development-level differences; it encodes a structural spatial inequality in the distribution of creative economy enabling conditions that requires deliberate policy intervention to address. Porter [7] would identify the concentration of creative economy cluster advantages in a single metropolitan region as a structural vulnerability for national competitiveness, not a strength, because it undermines the geographical diversity of innovation inputs and constrains the scale of the national creative tourism system as a whole.

Conceptual Model of Creative Tourism Territorial Organization

Figure 2 presents the conceptual model of creative tourism territorial organization developed for Azerbaijan. The model is structured across five vertical layers corresponding to the principal levels of the territorial development system, with horizontal differentiation at the cluster level reflecting the empirically derived regional typology.

LAYER 1 — MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS	
National Policy: State Tourism Strategy 2023–2027 Creative Economy Framework Post-conflict Reconstruction Agenda	International Framework: UNESCO Conventions UNWTO Guidelines SDG 8, 10, 11 EU Neighbourhood Policy

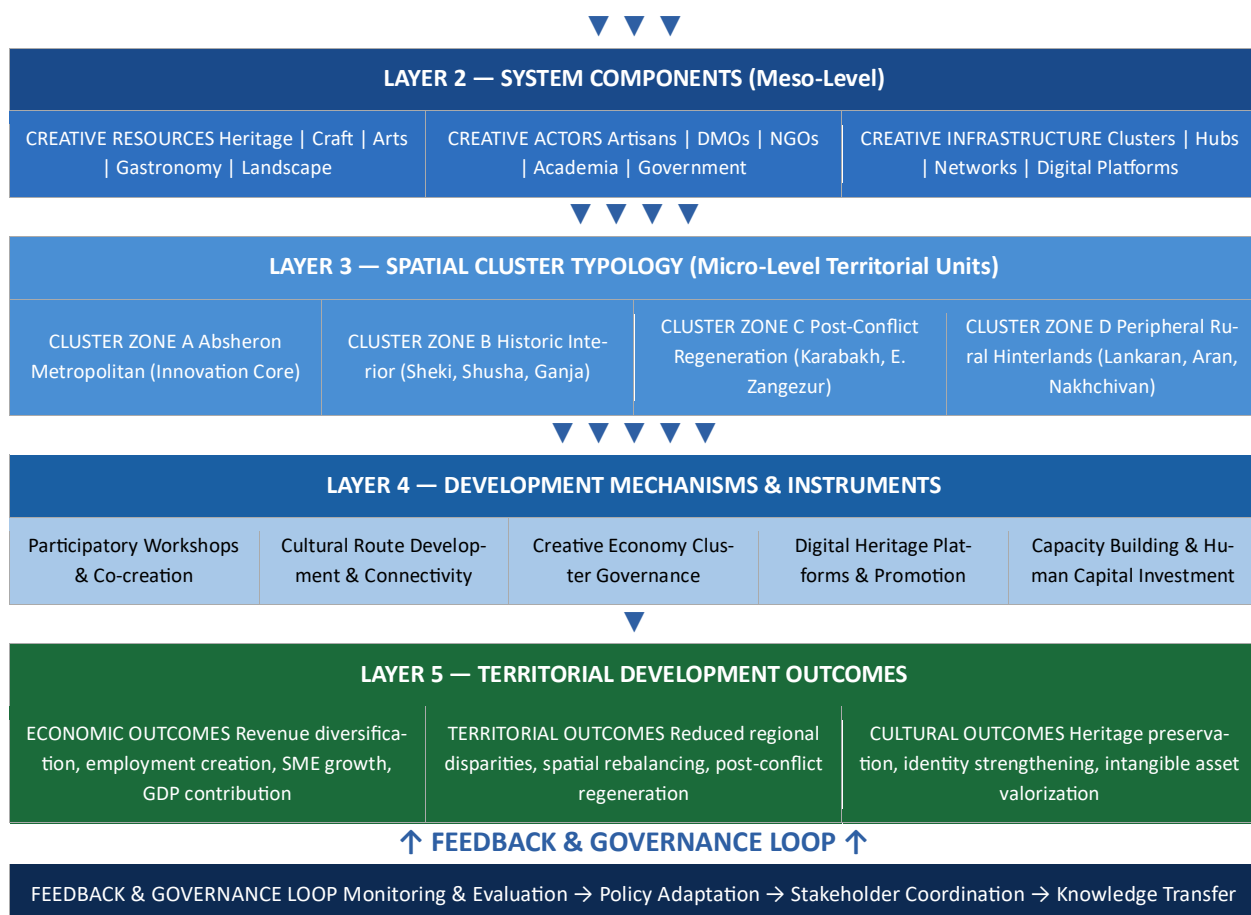


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Creative Tourism Territorial Organization in Azerbaijan

Source: Author's elaboration based on Porter (1990, pp. 148–175); Richards (2020, pp. 7–15); Hall & Williams (2019, pp. 215–224); UNWTO (2018, pp. 34–42)

The conceptual model depicted in Figure 2 advances upon existing territorial tourism models by making explicit the multi-scalar causal architecture that connects macro-level policy drivers to micro-level territorial outcomes through a structured system of components, spatial differentiations, and implementation mechanisms. The model's analytical contribution lies in three specific structural features. First, the model distinguishes four spatially and functionally differentiated cluster zones that correspond to the empirical regional typology established in Table 2 and Figure 1. Cluster Zone A (Absheron Metropolitan) is characterized as the innovation core of the national creative tourism system, where the concentration of creative infrastructure, educational institutions, digital economy capacity, and international connectivity positions it as the hub from which knowledge, investment, and market networks radiate to the rest of the national system. Cluster Zone B (Historic Interior: Sheki, Shusha, Ganja) represents the cultural heartland of the creative tourism system, comprising regions with the highest heritage density and the most deeply rooted living craft and performing arts traditions. Cluster Zone C (Post-conflict Regeneration: Karabakh and East Zangezur) is conceptualized as a priority development zone where the extraordinary heritage endowment requires targeted institutional investment, infrastructure development, and careful integration of community participation principles to achieve creative tourism activation. Cluster Zone D (Peripheral Rural Hinterlands: Lankaran, Aran, Nakhchivan) represents regions where creative tourism constitutes a viable but longer-horizon rural diversification strategy.

Second, the model incorporates a feedback and governance loop at its base that reflects the dynamic, adaptive character of territorial development systems. Drawing on Hall and Williams [4], this feedback mechanism encompasses monitoring and evaluation, policy adaptation, stakeholder coordination, and knowledge transfer functions that must operate continuously to maintain the developmental efficacy of the creative tourism territorial system. The absence of an effective governance loop is identified in the literature as the primary reason for the persistence of regional disparities in national tourism systems, and its inclusion in the model reflects the analytical centrality of institutional capacity to the Azerbaijan case.

Third, the distinction between economic, territorial, and cultural outcomes in Layer 5 is analytically important because it resists the reductive tendency to evaluate creative tourism exclusively in terms of visitor numbers and direct revenue. The territorial rebalancing outcomes — reduced regional disparities, spatial redistribution of economic activity, and post-conflict area regeneration — are both the primary policy justification for creative tourism development in the Azerbaijani context and the dimension most likely to be undervalued by conventional tourism planning metrics. Richards [10] has argued compellingly that the transformative developmental potential of creative tourism is most fully realized when its evaluation framework encompasses cultural, social, and spatial outcomes alongside economic indicators.

Cause-Effect Relationships and Policy Implications

The causal architecture embedded in the conceptual model illuminates a set of critical policy-relevant relationships that require explicit analytical attention. The primary causal pathway in the model runs from macro-level policy commitment through institutional and infrastructure investment to cluster zone activation, ultimately generating the economic and territorial outcomes that justify the policy investment. However, this pathway is mediated by a series of enabling conditions — including accessible connectivity, skilled human capital, functional governance networks, and authentic community participation — whose absence will block creative tourism development regardless of the quality of the underlying resource base.

For the Karabakh Economic Zone, the policy implication of this causal architecture is direct and urgent: the prioritization of creative tourism infrastructure development — particularly cultural hubs, artisan production facilities, interpretive centers, and hospitality capacity — as a foundational element of the broader reconstruction program, rather than as a secondary addition to be implemented after economic and physical reconstruction is complete. The international experience of post-conflict cultural tourism development, reviewed in Hall and Williams [4], consistently demonstrates that early integration of cultural economy principles in reconstruction planning generates superior long-term economic and social outcomes compared to subsequent retrofit approaches.

For peripheral regions in Cluster Zone D, the causal model suggests that connectivity investment — both physical (road and transport infrastructure) and digital (broadband, digital marketing platforms) — is the critical binding constraint. Unlike the post-conflict zones where institutional capacity is the primary limitation, peripheral rural regions in Azerbaijan typically possess functioning artisan communities and cultural assets but lack the market connectivity that would allow them to participate effectively in the national creative tourism system. OECD [6] evidence from comparable emerging economy contexts supports targeted digital economy investment as the most cost-effective intervention for integrating peripheral creative tourism assets into national and international market networks.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that Azerbaijan possesses the foundational conditions for the development of a nationally significant and spatially diversified creative tourism economy, but that the realization of this potential requires a deliberate, analytically informed, and institutionally coordinated approach to territorial organization that goes substantially beyond current policy frameworks. Three principal conclusions emerge from the analysis.

First, the creative tourism resource base of Azerbaijan, while exceptional in its quality and cultural depth, is characterized by a fundamental spatial mismatch between resource location and infrastructure capacity. The most culturally resonant and internationally distinctive creative assets — living Mugham traditions, artisan craft communities, UNESCO-inscribed heritage sites, and the extraordinary historical landscape of Karabakh — are disproportionately concentrated in interior and peripheral regions that currently lack the infrastructure, institutional capacity, and market connectivity required to translate resource endowment into economic development outcomes. Resolving this mismatch constitutes the central organizational challenge for Azerbaijani creative tourism policy.

Second, the four-cluster-zone territorial model developed in this study provides a spatially differentiated and analytically grounded framework for organizing creative tourism development intervention. The model's distinction between the Absheron innovation core, the Historic Interior cultural heartland, the Post-conflict Regeneration zone, and the Peripheral Rural Hinterlands reflects the empirically observed diversity of development trajectories and policy requirements across Azerbaijan's regions, and provides a conceptual basis for differentiated resource allocation, institutional design, and market development strategies that current one-size-fits-all tourism policy frameworks cannot accommodate.

Third, the governance architecture of the national creative tourism system requires fundamental strengthening if the territorial development potential identified in this study is to be realized. The absence of a dedicated inter-ministerial coordination mechanism for creative tourism development, the fragmentation of responsibility across the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Tourism, and the Azerbaijan Tourism Board, and the limited institutional capacity of regional-level development actors collectively constitute a governance deficit that is likely to prove more limiting than resource or infrastructure constraints in the medium term. The creation of a National Creative Tourism Territorial Development Agency with a clear spatial development mandate, technical capacity, and multi-stakeholder governance structure is identified as the highest-priority institutional reform recommendation of this study.

Future research should extend this analysis through primary empirical data collection — including regional stakeholder surveys, visitor profile studies, and economic multiplier analyses — that would allow the composite scoring framework developed here to be validated and refined. Comparative analysis with analogous post-Soviet transitional economies that have achieved significant creative tourism development, including Georgia and Armenia, would provide valuable benchmarking insights for Azerbaijani policy design. The post-conflict reconstruction of the Karabakh Economic Zone represents, in particular, an extraordinary natural experiment in creative economy-integrated territorial development that merits longitudinal scholarly monitoring.

REFERENCES:

- [1] Azerbaijan Ministry of Culture. (2023). *State Programme on the Development of Tourism in Azerbaijan 2023–2027*. Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan.
- [2] Azerbaijan State Statistics Committee. (2023). *Regional Statistics of Azerbaijan 2023*. SSCRA Publishing.
- [3] Florida, R. (2002). *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Basic Books. pp. 1–404.
- [4] Hall, C. M., & Williams, A. M. (2019). *Tourism and Innovation* (2nd ed.). Routledge. pp. 14–224.
- [5] (2000). *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*. Earthscan. pp. 1–300.

- [6] OECD. (2019). *Tourism Trends and Policies 2019*. OECD Publishing. pp. 44–101. <https://doi.org/10.1787/tourism-2019-en>
- [7] Porter, M. E. (1990). *The Competitive Advantage of Nations*. Free Press. pp. 1–855.
- [8] Pratt, A. C. (2008). Creative cities: The cultural industries and the creative class. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 90(2), 107–117.
- [9] Richards, G. (2011). Creativity and tourism: The state of the art. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38(4), 1225–1253. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2011.07.008>
- [10] Richards, G. (2020). Designing creative places: The role of creative tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 85, 102922. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102922>
- [11] Russo, A. P., & Richards, G. (Eds.). (2016). *Reinventing the Local in Tourism: Producing, Consuming and Negotiating Place*. Channel View Publications. pp. 1–330.
- [12] UNESCO. (2022). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage: Implementation report*. UNESCO Publishing.
- [13] UNWTO. (2018). *Tourism and Culture Synergies*. World Tourism Organization. pp. 12–42. <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284418978>