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This article is part of the Special Issue

🔗 [Sustainable Tourism](#)

Cite this Article

Malisiova, S., & Kostopoulou, S. (2023). Regional Creative Capacity and Creative Tourism Development. The Case of Cultural Associations in Peripheral Areas. *Highlights of Sustainability*, 2(4), 241–258.

<https://doi.org/10.54175/hsustain2040017>

Highlights of Science



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🔗 <https://www.hos.pub>

Barcelona, Spain

Article

Regional Creative Capacity and Creative Tourism Development. The Case of Cultural Associations in Peripheral Areas

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Abstract Regional Creative Capacity (RCC) is a dynamic research topic that integrates authentic creativity, indigenous knowledge, innovation, entrepreneurship, and networking. RCC is a valuable tool for regional policy makers to achieve economic growth, tourism development, and social cohesion in peripheral areas. Cultural Associations, especially in remote areas, serve as “authentic organizations” related to local culture and traditions that support regional uniqueness, identity, and authenticity, and foster creative capacity through various cultural activities (non-typical museums, local cultural events and festivals, revival of customs, rituals, gastronomy, craft etc.). Nowadays, tourists are increasingly seeking “authentic” cultural tourism experiences that require active participation and co-creation in the community’s customs and manifestations. Therefore, cultural associations can be examined within the broader perspective of creative tourism. The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether the dynamics of cultural associations can function as a mechanism to encourage creative tourism in peripheral communities, using four creativity criteria: people, process, product, and environment. The study also aims to examine networking opportunities of cultural associations based on three criteria: administrative, spatial and functional, and to propose novel local creative tourism networks. The qualitative research method employed is a case study approach with structured observation, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with nineteen Cultural Associations in the Regional Unit of Rodopi in Northern Greece. Research findings reveal a strong potential for the development of creative tourism in the broader area with highlighted perspectives and options for further action, while emphasizing the need for networking of cultural associations.

Keywords cultural associations; creative tourism; networking; peripheral areas; development

Open Access

Received: 31 May 2023

Accepted: 3 November 2023

Published: 11 November 2023

Academic Editors

Snežana Štetić, Balkan Network of Tourism Experts, Serbia and Sara Stanić Jovanović, Academy of Applied Studies Šumadija, Serbia

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1. Introduction

Creativity as an important factor in the development and prosperity of an area, is considered to be a dynamic research topic. Creativity elements like knowledge, innovation, networking, and entrepreneurship have grown in importance as significant tools in local development policies, especially for peripheral and rural areas, both at the international and European levels [1–9]. In this context, the concept of “Regional Creative Capacity” (RCC) was developed as a result of research on the relationship between creativity and space. The term “Regional Creative Capacity” refers to a region’s ability to generate knowledge, which enables innovation and the spread of creative activity, while ensuring the viability and sustainability of the process. Cultural industries are recognized as a vital, ever-growing, and highly dynamic component of Regional Creative Capacity. In recent years, they have been more and more at the forefront of academic research and local development policies, serving as vehicles for urban regeneration and regional growth [10].

Traditional cultural industries, based on tangible and intangible cultural and rural heritage, are especially important for local economic development and social cohesion, as they can act as poles for attracting visitors and as sources of income and employment opportunities for residents [11,12]. The conservation of tangible and intangible local cultural assets is facilitated by cultural associations, which are described as “authentic organizations” [13] committed to local culture and traditions, particularly in remote rural areas. A region’s cultural identity, social inclusion, and local development may be promoted through the creative activities of cultural as-

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sociations, which also symbolize and reflect the uniqueness and authenticity of the place [14,15]. Modern travelers increasingly seek “authentic” cultural tourism experiences, that include interactive creative activities based on local customs and cultural expressions. Consequently, creative tourism might incorporate creative activities of cultural associations which can promote a sustainable small-scale cultural tourism product that offers an authentic travel experience along with an educational and creative experience of the traditional culture of the area [16,17].

This paper explores the potential for creative tourism development in peripheral areas using the Regional Creative Capacity approach, arguing for its ability to enlighten the relationship between space and creativity. Cultural associations are investigated as key factors shaping the regional creative capacity and as contributors to tourism development in peripheral areas of Greece. Cultural associations are directly involved in local cultural and tourism development, organizing educational events and attracting visitors, thus contributing to the community’s economic development. More specifically, the paper examines whether cultural associations can act as a mechanism to encourage creative tourism in peripheral communities using four creativity criteria: people, process, product, and environment. The term “people” refers to the work that creative people do for cultural associations, “product” refers to the creative activities of Cultural Associations, “process” refers to the participation of tourists in the creative activities of cultural associations, and “environment” refers to the infrastructure required for tourism development. The study also aims to explore networking opportunities of cultural associations based on three criteria: administrative, spatial and functional, and to propose novel local creative tourism networks.

A case study approach with structured observation, document analysis, and in-depth interviews was used as the research methodology. The study area included nineteen Cultural Associations within the Regional Unit of Rodopi in Northern Greece. The research focused on the Municipality of Komotini, an area dominated by the primary sector, unfavorable geographical conditions, inadequate transportation infrastructure, limited access to markets, and lack of resources and qualified human resources, but with rich cultural heritage and local traditions. Research findings reveal a strong potential for the development of creative tourism in the broader area with highlighted perspectives and options for further action, while emphasizing the need for networking of cultural associations.

The paper is structured as follows. After the introduction, in Section 2, the review of the literature on the conceptual background of the research is outlined, to highlight the academic debate on regional creative capacity, cultural associations, creative tourism, and networking, and their role in local development in peripheral areas. In Section 3, the study area is briefly described and the methodological framework is analyzed by use of a case study approach with structured observation, document analysis, and in-depth interviews. In Section 4, the research findings are presented to show whether cultural associations within the study area can contribute to creative tourism development and encourage networking opportunities for peripheral communities. Finally, in Section 5, the conclusions are presented and discussed, and recommendations are suggested for future research.

2. Literature Review: Conceptual background

2.1. Regional Creative Capacity and Cultural Associations

Creativity is characterized as a rather controversial, multidimensional concept, challenging to measure [18]. Scientific interest in creativity is reflected in a wide range of approaches and definitions in numerous scientific disciplines including Psychology, Education, Philosophy, Sociology, Theology, Linguistics, Technology, Economics, Business Administration, and Management [19]. One has to emphasize that creativity and culture are not the same concept. In line with earlier studies, Gong et al. [20] conceptualize culture as “the transmission and creation of content and patterns of values, ideas, and other factors that can shape and mold individual cognitive and behavioral tendencies”. Plentiful researchers have examined the relationship between creativity and culture, using a range of independent variables, however, a number of shortcomings appeared [20]. As Glaveanu et al. [21] indicate “creativity and culture are intertwined: the former uses the signs and tools made available by the latter to produce new cultural resources that go on to facilitate future creative acts”.

The concept “Regional Creative Capacity” was developed to emphasize the relationship between creativity and space. The term refers to the ability of each region to generate knowledge, spread creativity, and disseminate innovation, while ensuring the viability and sustainability of the process, knowledge usually measured by the values, culture, and traditions in the region [4,22]. As a result, the ability to deploy the local environment and establish connections with local culture and traditions can be a key competitive advantage for regional development. Since consumers are gradually getting less interested in mass-produced goods, emphasis on authenticity is thought to be more appealing [23]. People prefer to interact with authentic communities that have distinct features, so the unique characteristics of the place can be capitalized in a strategy for local economic development. Thus, the creative capacity of a region consists of regional uniqueness features such as heritage, traditions, and social characteristics, that are often promoted by local cultural associations or organizations, when endowed with a certain level of creativity [22,24].

As Hooper-Greenhill et al. [25] point out, cultural associations are thought of as organizations where creativity thrives when people are encouraged to think differently, spread new ideas, and create innovative products [26]. Cultural organizations through their programming and activities, especially when tailored to the specific conditions of economically, socially, and geographically disadvantaged communities, generate positive economic, social, and environmental externalities that surpass initial perceptions. They have a considerable impact on a number of economic sectors like transport, catering, accommodation, and tourism, thus contributing to the creation of dynamic ecosystems that enhance the attractiveness of territories and their economic development [27]. Both in academic research and development policies, cultural industries, such as museums, art galleries, theatres, festivals, etc., are regarded as vital elements in fostering regional creativity [28]. Cultural associations are a particularly promising part of cultural industries since they constitute institutions with the acknowledged mission to preserve, interpret, and disseminate knowledge, and to educate the public about culture, history, science, and the environment [13,29]. Cultural associations aim to contribute to the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage by acting as “non-typical museums” (photography collections, traditional tools, costumes, archives, etc.), venues for traditional cultural expressions (local cultural events and festivals), channels for the dissemination of localities (customs, rituals, religious acts, gastronomy, etc.), and as links for promoting the region’s historical past through a variety of workshops (crafts, sewing, etc.).

Cultural associations can provide social and cultural benefits through the protection and preservation of the community’s cultural heritage, the collection and dissemination of traditional cultural assets, the promotion of local history and culture, as well as the facilitation of community participation in cultural events and educational activities [30,31]. Their role is to familiarize residents and visitors with the local history and culture and to encourage creativity through relevant activities. Cultural associations may contribute to the enhancement of creativity and inspiration, the recognition and understanding of the unique cultural elements of local communities and various cultures, the creation of a sense of pride among the inhabitants of their community, and in general the motivation of active citizens [32]. Despite their unique qualities, the majority of cultural associations are of limited size, especially in remote communities, often having financial difficulties, that confine their capacity to communicate their creative activities with a wider audience of visitors and to participate fully and effectively as advocates in policymaking processes [33]. Even if creative activities of cultural associations have an important development potential, this has to be materialized in socioeconomic outcomes, often relying on the communities’ ability to offer effective tourism initiatives that draw tourists and benefit from the income generated. This entails the need for coordinated strategies that capitalize on synergies that engage cultural associations, tourism stakeholders, and local community authorities, in order to pursue creative tourism agendas incorporating differing priorities of the various stakeholders involved [34]. In recent years, international and European development policies have acknowledged the link between culture and tourism. While cultural and creative sectors are supported by tourism-generated income, creative and cultural industries have the potential to support tourism through forms of creativity and learning experiences [34]. In this context, traditional cultural industries based on tangible and intangible cultural heritage, like cultural associations, have the potential to promote creative tourism and can be used as a tool for local well-being and revitalization.

2.2. Creative Tourism in Peripheral Areas

Creative tourism is considered a sustainable form of tourism where authentic experiences provide an alternative to mass tourism patterns and co-creation is critical in planning and consumer learning and creative experiences [35,36]. The main objectives of creative tourism include promoting interaction between visitors and locals, as well as active creative activities motivated by the region's endogenous resources (location and people) [37]. The European project EUROTEx which sought to promote crafts through tourism, served as an example for this idea [38,39]. The term “creative tourism”, coined by Richards & Raymond [38], is used to describe tourism that relies heavily on visitors' active participation. Rather than being merely observers, visitors actively participate in, respond to, and co-create the overall experience. They also actively learn about the places they visit and use this knowledge to develop their own skills [40]. The term quickly gained popularity and grew more specialized as a result of the formation of courses and workshops, conferences, and seminars [40–42]. Tourists have the opportunity to learn more about local traditional customs in various fields such as arts and crafts, spirituality, nature, sports, design, gastronomy, health and healing, and languages [38].

The rather narrow definition of “learning” experiences primarily introduced by Richards & Raymond [38] was largely outpaced by the concepts and activities associated with creative tourism long ago. In his seminal study, Richards [43] argues that the relationship between creativity and tourism reflects the daily lives of tourists who wish to engage in creative acts during their visit. According to Richards & Marques ([16], p. 4) creative tourism “*now includes a wide range of creative experiences in which the ‘creative’ content can be foregrounded or used as a ‘creative backdrop’, and in which the level of tourist and ‘local’ involvement in the production of the experience can be high or low*”. The methods of creative tourism actually used involve interactions between travelers, service providers, and the local community, all of which gain from the collaborative process by exchanging ideas and skills. Consequently, creative tourism, as defined by Richards & Marques ([16], p. 4), includes:

- *A creative means of using existing resources;*
- *A means of strengthening identity and distinctiveness;*
- *A form of self-expression/discovery;*
- *A form of edutainment – education a self-realization and education;*
- *A source of “atmosphere” for places;*
- *A source for recreating and reviving places.*

Four types of creativity approaches in the tourism sector are often used in the literature: people, product, process, and environment. The participation of creative individuals focuses in “creative class” activities, the creative products are used as tourist attractions, the creative process is considered through visitors' involvement in creative activities, while local amenities and facilities are considered to be part of the environment [43–45]. Tourists often prefer to get a wide range of services that offer a variety of options and experience opportunities, where experience in tourism is described as “*what people experience as tourists*” ([46], p.1). Numerous initiatives in the field of creative tourism are increasingly incorporating into their process local customs and traditions, knowledge, and lifestyles, along with additional features of the local environment and culture of places [47]. This place-sensitive development option links creativity to the place and creates genuine experiences related to the location. The authenticity and uniqueness of the local characteristics and qualities are often found in peripheral/rural areas, and these are the key elements that create memorable tourist experiences.

Therefore, travelers who want to actively participate in cultural life and create cultural experiences alongside local communities, especially in peripheral regions, often choose creative tourism [48]. Place-based specific characteristics are valuable sources of creativity, as well as strategic components for fostering innovative projects with local resonance in the field of creative tourism. When viewed holistically, a place includes its physical surroundings, cultures, intangible and tangible heritage, and the local population [49,50]. By linking places and visitors in the co-creation of differentiated experiences, creative tourism challenges local communities to act as placemaking agents in the coproduction of territorial amenities, and can therefore be a useful tool to complement local development strategies in peripheral areas, once it has the ability to engage local communities and generate territorial benefits [51].

Peripheral areas are recorded at the global, national, regional, and local levels [52]. It is challenging to provide a generalized definition of peripherality since the concept can be inter-

preted from a spatial, economic, social, and political approach [53]. The term is frequently defined in geographical terms, with reference to the distance of an area from a central point or the limited accessibility of the area to the center [54–58]. A region's remote location typically results in limitations to its development in terms of market access, investment, lack of innovation, entrepreneurship, competitiveness, etc. In the international literature [59–61], social, cultural, historical, and political factors are also introduced (e.g., quality of institutions, governance, trust, etc.) in addition to geographical factors. Some peripheral areas have significant historical, socio-economic, and cultural roots, while others emerged as a result of political and administrative decisions. Peripheral areas are characterized by underdevelopment and share common characteristics [62] such as economic activities that are typically based on natural resources (agriculture, livestock, fishing, minerals), less favorable geographical conditions and inadequate transport links, lack of resources, skilled human resources, and more.

The terms “peripherality” and “marginalization” are occasionally closely related, because they both refer to a situation that may result from unfavorable environmental, cultural, social, economic, and political conditions [63]. At this point, it is important to emphasize that the concepts of peripherality and rurality are distinct. Despite the fact that the concepts of rurality and marginalization are often used interchangeably, rural areas are not always peripheral or marginal places, whereas peripheral areas can include both rural and urban areas. Peripherality can be used to assess a region's potential for economic and social development, but it cannot establish whether a region qualifies as a rural area [64].

Although peripheral areas have several disadvantages, they often have significant natural resources and a rich cultural and historical heritage, with uniqueness and authenticity of local traditions [24,65,66]. In this context, peripheral areas have the opportunity to reevaluate their role in establishing a comparative tourism advantage, since their characteristics may present new opportunities [67]. Isolation and decentralization may emphasize the serenity and uniqueness of the local environment, culture, and quality of life. The countryside offers the possibility of being in contact with nature and the traditional way of life and may serve as the basis for both a unique cultural heritage experience and a new “community-based” development model [68]. Furthermore, the importance of networking for the preservation and evolution of creative industries like cultural associations, is also acknowledged in academic research and development policies on the creative economy, particularly in peripheral areas.

2.3. Cultural Associations' Networking

The term “network” is used in many contexts and has a variety of meanings, including relationships between individuals, or groups in a community or region, and between communities and regions, club activities, company cooperations and contacts, governance mechanisms, or institutional modes of exchange [69]. A network can be defined as a set of established social relations, of varying degrees, between interdependent actors, where individual units do not exist in isolation, but are instead constantly defined in relation to other units. That is, the network is a set of nodes, e.g., individuals, groups, organizations, and concepts that are connected by strategic links and ties. The main characteristics of a network are its informal, collaborative, spontaneous, and multi-level character, voluntary participation, lack of physical boundaries, and the existence of both formal institutional interconnections and informal relationships [69,70].

Networking is used as a tool in development strategies and has a special impact on regional growth since it fosters connections between individuals, groups, and regions. Networking is vital for enhancing the local development capacity because it plays a prominent role in managing resources and business uncertainty, it facilitates the diffusion of innovation, creativity, the exchange of experiences, and good practices. Additionally, it encourages cooperation, the creation of a trusting environment, sharing of knowledge and skills at all levels and can result in economies of scale [71,72].

Creative clusters [73,74], creative cities [75], cultural hubs [76], creative spaces [77], creative milieux [78], and creative ecosystems [79], are just a few of the ways that the networking of creative industries evolves. Despite the complexity of networking, all these concepts come to the same conclusion: connections and interactions among active individuals benefit society by turning a variety of inputs into advantageous outputs. Spatial-based local networking is regarded as essential for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) because it fosters knowledge integration, creative thinking, and business expansion. In the tourism sector, the tight interconnection between attractions, services, transportation, information, and promotion

emphasizes the necessity for networking and collaboration [80]. Especially for peripheral areas, networking is considered a key development tool, where links and interactions are formed with the main purpose of exchanging knowledge and practices, with an emphasis on tacit knowledge [22,69].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Area

The Municipality of Komotini, in the Regional Unit of Rodopi (NUTS III), in the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace (REMTh) located in Northern Greece, has been selected as the study area to highlight the proposed methodology. In particular, settlements in the Municipality of Komotini with a population of less than 5000 inhabitants were chosen for this study because, according to the literature [65,81,82], these are classified as peripheral areas. The Municipality of Komotini shares borders with Bulgaria to the north, the Regional Unit of Xanthi to the east, the Regional Unit of Evros to the west, and the Thracian Sea to the south. The Municipality of Komotini consists of three Municipality Units, namely, Komotini (1), Aigiros (2), and Neo Sidirochori (3) (Figure 1, Table 1).

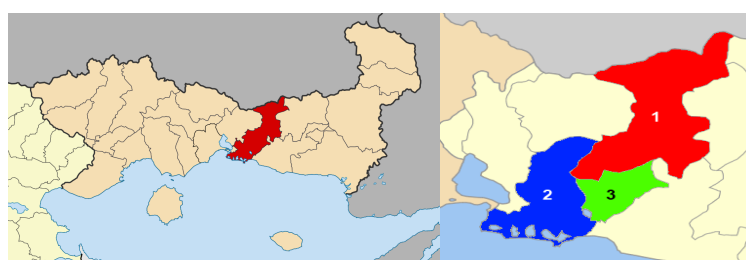


Figure 1. Administrative Structure of the Municipality of Komotini.

Table 1. Administrative Structure & Population of the Municipality of Komotini.

Municipality	Municipality Unit	Population 2011	Population 2021
Komotini	Komotini	60,648	60,160
	Aigiros	3493	2870
	Neo Sidirochori	2778	2213
	Total	66,919	65,243

The Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace is one of Greece’s weakest regional economies, as it records low performance in GDP per capita (10,908 Euros for 2020), ranking in the 12th place out of the 13 Greek regions according to the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) [83]. The regional economy is dominated by the primary sector (agriculture, fishing, livestock); however, the proportion of secondary and tertiary industries is also significant, despite the absence of dynamic knowledge and innovation-intensive sectors. Particularly, the tourism industry performs poorly, with the majority of visitors arriving in the coastal areas of the Region during the summer. The area has a rich cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) with an abundance of archaeological sites, monuments, and museums, a wealth of folklore traditions, local festivals, and folk events [84].

3.2. Methodology

The aim of this paper is to investigate whether cultural associations can serve as a mechanism to promote creative tourism in peripheral areas, by use of qualitative research tools applying four creativity criteria: people, process, product, and environment [43–45]. “People” refers to the work of creative people in cultural associations, “product” refers to the creative activities of Cultural Associations, “process” refers to the participation of tourists in creative activities of cultural associations, and “environment” refers to the infrastructure required for the proper functioning of tourism development. The study also aims to examine networking opportunities of local cultural associations using three criteria: administrative, spatial and functional, and to propose novel local creative tourism networks. The methodology includes secondary and primary research (structured observation, document analysis, and in-depth interviews).

Secondary research was carried out to explore the “environment”. An extensive recording of the study area’s characteristics was held, including administrative and economic characteristics, geomorphological elements, transport infrastructure and accessibility to public transportation services, tourism infrastructure, and development components of the area. Research was also conducted to identify the creative and cultural industries and especially, the cultural associations within the study area. The sources of secondary research information included: the internet (e.g., digital guides, online newspapers, social media) and document analysis (e.g., studies, published papers, official data sources, reports and statistical data, archives and documents made available by regional and local administration authorities).

An empirical investigation was carried out as part of the primary research to examine the remaining three creativity criteria, “people”, “product” and “process”, in order to conceptualize and understand the dynamics of Cultural Associations in creative tourism development. The research method used was the case study approach [85]. More specifically, nineteen cultural associations in the Municipality of Komotini, in settlements of less than 5000 inhabitants were investigated through primary field research with semi-structured in-depth interviews and qualitative techniques used for the data treatment. [86,36]. The semi-structured interview was based on a questionnaire consisting of twenty open- and close-ended questions, organized into three sections. The first section consists of ten short-answer and/or multiple-choice questions related to general information about the Cultural Association (name, year of establishment/history, members, categories of fixed and cooperating contributors, categories of external partners/suppliers, funding sources, promotion and marketing actions, innovation practices, its role in the development of the region). In the second section of the survey, five open-answer and Likert scale questions are included, that refer to the cultural association activities related to creative tourism, the participation of the local community and tourists, networking synergies (formal and informal) with local bodies, and other relevant cultural industries. The third section includes five questions about the respondent’s demographic characteristics (age, gender, professional status, level of education, studies related to the arts, experience in the field).

The category “people” is largely based on Florida’s theory on the creative class, defined as “*people in design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or creative content*” ([4], p. 8). In this research, the term “people” is further expanded and adapted to local characteristics, local traditions or expertise, authenticity and uniqueness of the peripheral/rural area and focuses on local traditional knowledge. Thus, in addition to the core of creative professions (art, drama and music teachers, dancers, choreographers, literature teachers, designers, etc.), this analysis includes people (professionals or not) who are engaged in activities related to the local traditional knowledge such as local gastronomy, traditional handicrafts, social practices/rituals, local dialects [37,87].

The term “*process applies to motivation, perception, learning, thinking and communicating*” ([88], p. 308). In this study, “process” refers to visitors taking part in creative activities of cultural associations. In the context of creative tourism, travelers look for destinations that offer access to settings and opportunities for creative activities [89]. The development of creative tourism in peripheral and rural areas is to be based on the relationship between place and identity, with special attention to the process that emerges from tourists and local culture, traditions, and creative activities [87,90]. Tourists have the opportunity to learn about and engage with local traditional practices in various fields and gain the experience of the unique identity and authenticity of the area.

The category “product” refers to the creative activities of cultural associations. These activities were identified and classified according to the taxonomy pattern proposed by Richards & Raymond [38], Richards & Marques [16], and the UNESCO [91] classification of cultural heritage. As a result of the analysis, nine fields and twenty-seven activities emerged (Table 2):

Table 2. “Product”: Taxonomy of Creative Activities of Cultural Associations.

Field	Activity
Arts	Traditional dance classes
	Traditional music classes
	Choir classes/Performances
	Photography classes

Table 2. (Continued)

Performing Arts	Revival of traditions and rituals
Arts and Crafts	Basketry workshops
	Ceramic exhibitions/workshops
	Wooden crafts exhibitions/workshops
	Knitting exhibitions/workshops
	Jewelry exhibitions/workshops
	Flowers compositions exhibitions/workshops
	Carving exhibitions/workshops
Design	Glass exhibitions/workshops
	Painting exhibitions/classes
Local Gastronomy	Sketch classes
	Cooking Classes/Culinary Arts
	Bakery Classes
Dialect	Cooking Traditional Recipes
	Local dialects workshop
Spirituality	Writing workshops (poems, fairy tales from local myths)
	Folklore workshops/conferences (manners, customs, popular events, other local activities)
	Traditional games workshop
Creative Routes/Walks	Nature (forest, lakes, rivers)
	Cultural heritage (archaeological sites, monuments, churches, monasteries, castles)
	Wine routes
	Photographic routes
Sports	Sports

The next step in the methodology was to build a database using four creative metrics about the dynamics of cultural associations (Table 3) with more specified criteria (cultural/creative profile, administrative elements, accessibility, tourism infrastructure, and networking). The purpose of the database is to create a methodological tool to provide spatially organized information to local tourism stakeholders (e.g., tourists, decision-makers, etc.) [92,93].

Table 3. Database of Cultural Associations.

Creativity Criteria	Category	Sub-categories
People		Name
		First Appearance (year)
		Contact information (address, email, tel., social media)
Product		Fixed and cooperating contributors
		Number of members
		Creative activities
Process		Degree of tourist participation
Environment	Administrative Data	Municipality
		Municipality Unit
		Village
		Population
	Tourism Infrastructure	Hotels (number of units/beds)
		Rental Rooms (number of units/beds)
		Campings (number of units/seats)
		Total number of beds
	Accessibility	Geographical distance from the capital of the Municipality (km)
		Road network condition (Motorway/National Road/Provincial Road)
		Daily connection with public transport (Yes/No)

The final phase in the methodology involved trying to attempt cultural associations networking based on their creative activities. The study investigates potential synergies among Cultural Associations in order to build local creative tourism networks. Local networks are the first step for the creation of wider functional networks for synergies at the regional, national, or international levels. The potential creative tourism networks are suggested by introducing three criteria:

- the administrative criterion: creative activities that take place in each municipality unit;
- the spatial criterion: creative activities with reference to accessibility;
- the functional criterion: creative activities that have the same content.

4. Results

4.1. Cultural Associations and Creative Tourism in the Study Area

The research findings demonstrate the importance of Cultural Associations to the growth of settlements in the Komotini Municipality. Many Cultural Associations with a variety of creative activities are located within the study area, however, the majority are still unexplored (Figure 2).

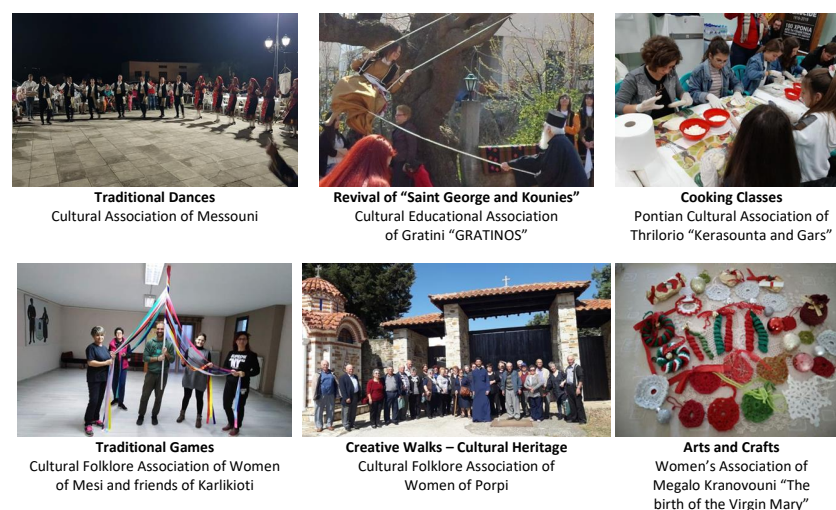


Figure 2. Creative Activities of Cultural Associations of Municipality of Komotini.

People

The field research reveals that volunteer work and female participation are the two key characteristics of the human resources of cultural associations. According to the fieldwork findings, cultural associations are non-profit organizations with the aim to produce, preserve, and disseminate cultural content. Each Association's activities are managed by the Board of Directors, which consists of five to eleven locally elected members. The results indicate that women over the age of fifty make up nearly 85% of the members. They do not receive any remuneration for the services they provide, acting voluntarily. In terms of educational attainment, the majority of the members have completed secondary education, while fewer have completed higher education (32%). Furthermore, only 7% of respondents surveyed claimed to have a university degree in a field associated with the arts or culture (e.g., museum curators, architects, musicians). External collaborators such as choreographers, musicians, theater-music teachers, and graphic designers, are employed for a small fee to carry out the creative activities in the categories of arts, crafts, design, and sports.

The creative activity categories of performing arts, local gastronomy, dialect, and spirituality are of particular interest. The local dialects and spirituality workshops are carried out by elderly residents, who transmit local knowledge and traditions with the support of the Department of Greek Philology at the Democritus University of Thrace, located at Komotini. Local associations' members, even though they lack formal culinary training, can conduct local gastronomy workshops. Finally, the revival of customs is carried out by the associations' members with the assistance of local authorities (Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, Municipality of Komotini).

Product

The following fields are where the creative activities of the cultural associations recorded in the study area stand out: 1) Arts, 2) Performing Arts, 3) Arts and Crafts, 4) Design, 5) Local Gastronomy, 6) Dialect, 7) Spirituality, 8) Creative Routes/Walks and 9) Sports. Residents of communities within the study area and members of the cultural associations participate in these activities. The fields with the strongest dynamics are the Creative routes/walks (Nature, Cultural heritage, Wine routes, and Photographic routes) with a percentage of 37.74% and the Arts (Traditional dances classes, Traditional music classes, Choir, Photography classes) with a percentage of 21.24%, while the field of Sports and Dialects registers rather low percentages (2.65% and 1.77% respectively) (Figure 3).

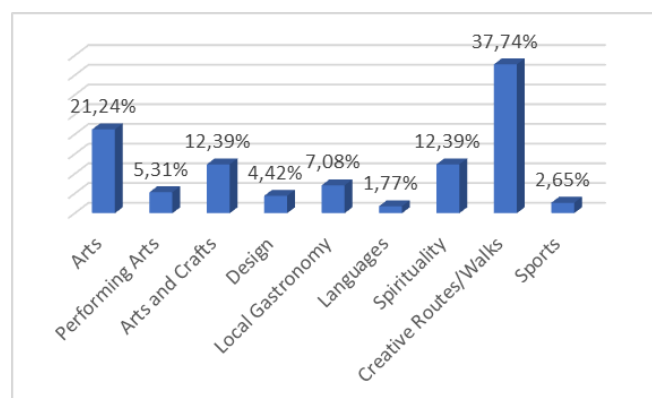


Figure 3. Creative Activities of Cultural Associations in Municipality of Komotini.

Examining each activity separately, we notice that the activities with the most potential include: a) Traditional dances, b) Cultural Heritage and Nature routes/walks, and c) Folklore workshops/conferences. The activities that have the least momentum include a) Revival of traditions and rituals, and b) Local dialect workshops, despite the fact that these activities are the “heart” of the region’s authenticity and tradition. More detailed information about the creative activities of Cultural Associations per settlement is recorded in Table 4.

Table 4. Creative Activities of Cultural Associations in the Study Area.

Name of Cultural Association (Population of Village)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Cultural & Folklore Association of Women of Aigeiros (924)	×		×		×		×	×	
Educational and Cultural Association of Messouni (238)	×	×					×	×	
Cultural Folklore Association of Women of Mesi and friends of Karlikioti (183)	×	×	×				×	×	
Cultural Association of Women of Nea Kallisti “Agios Dimitrios” (391)	×							×	
Cultural Folklore Association of Women of Porpi (452)	×							×	
Cultural Association of Fanari (490)		×						×	
Women’s Association of Megalo Kranouvouni “The birth of the Virgin Mary” (149)	×		×					×	
Folklore Cultural Association of Mesochori (119)	×								
Educational & Cultural Association of Women of Mikro Kranouvouni “St. Panteleimon” (159)	×						×	×	
Cultural Association of Paradimi and Friends (434)	×	×	×	×	×	×		×	
Cultural Educational Association of Gratini “GRATINOS” (365)	×	×					×	×	
Pontian Cultural Association of Thrilorio “Kerasounta and Gars” (894)	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	
Cultural Association of Roditis (1018)	×	×						×	×
Cultural Association of Karidia & Friends (357)	×						×	×	×
Cultural Association of Women of Kosmio (922)	×		×		×		×	×	
Cultural Association of Friends of Pandrosos (115)	×				×		×	×	×
Cultural Association of Women of Agioi Theodoroi (491)	×		×	×			×	×	
Educational Club of Neo Sidirochori (567)	×							×	
Cultural Association of Pagouria “Profitis Helias” (542)	×								

Note: 1. Arts; 2. Performing Arts; 3. Arts and Crafts; 4. Design; 5. Local Gastronomy; 6. Dialect; 7. Spirituality; 8. Creative routes/walks; 9. Sports.

Process

“Process” refers to the participation of tourists in creative activities of cultural associations. Based on the research findings, the types of tourists who attend creative activities of cultural associations fall into the following categories: foreign higher education students who visit the area through educational programs, e.g., Erasmus, secondary education students from schools in the broader region, the rest of the country or abroad as part of educational excursions in the area, members of other cultural associations from other parts of Greece and abroad (Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Turkey) and retirees from public Elderly Protection Centers of Greece visiting on an excursion the area. It is important that the connection between tourists and cultural associations does not occur within the context of an organized tourist package or promotion by the local authorities but through personal acquaintances of the members of cultural associations. Tourists have the opportunity to interact with and co-create cultural content during the execution of creative activities, and via this process, they can learn about local history, customs, and traditions.

Environment

“Environment” incorporates the characteristics of the study area (administrative data, tourism infrastructure, and accessibility) that encourage tourism development. Regarding Administrative Data it should be noticed that twelve out of the nineteen settlements recorded a population decline from 2011 to 2021, emphasizing inadequate local development policies. Furthermore, over the same period, the rural center of Neo Sidirochori, despite being the capital of the Municipal Unit, recorded a population decline of 33%, while the community of Mesi recorded the highest drop in population (41%). The communities of Thrilorio, Kosmio, Pandrosos, and Porpi had the lowest population decline, while the communities of Roditis, Karidia, and Fanari showed a significant increase. Regarding tourism infrastructure, great inequalities in accommodation can be noticed, with a severe lack of lodging options. Twelve hotels are established within the Municipal Unit of Komotini, all of which are located in the city of Komotini. There are no accommodations found in the rest of the Municipal Unit's settlements. The same pattern is observed in the Municipal Unit of Aigiros, where all four hotels and forty-one rental rooms are located in the Fanari settlement, along with one camping with 180 seats, a pattern that can be attributed to the socio-economic characteristics of tourists visiting the area. Finally, there are no accommodations listed at the Municipality Unit of Neo Sidirochori. Regarding accessibility, the majority of Cultural Associations are dispersed in rural settlements throughout the study area. Fanari in Aigiros Municipality Unit, located at a distance of 31 km from the capital city, is the outmost location of the Cultural Association, while Karidia in Komotini Municipality Unit is the nearest settlement at a distance of 4.1 km from the capital city. The majority of the settlements are connected by provincial roads, while fourteen settlements have daily public bus connections to the Komotini capital city.

4.2. Cultural Associations' Networking in the Study Area

One of the goals of the study is also to explore networking opportunities of cultural associations using three criteria: administrative, spatial and functional, and to propose novel local creative tourism networks. As already mentioned, cultural associations actively shape and promote local cultural heritage through creative activities and enable tourists and visitors to engage with the authenticity and uniqueness of a place. Based on the analysis and taking into consideration all of the aforementioned factors (administrative data, tourism infrastructure, accessibility), people, product, process, and environment, eight cultural associations within the area demonstrate a high level of creative potential, four have medium level and the remaining seven have low level (Figure 4).

A network is a structured form of collaboration in order to accomplish common goals and provide a variety of benefits for its members [94,95]. Networking of cultural associations based on common attributes (such as creative activities or geographical proximity) offers the potential for synergies among tourism and culture local stakeholders. In addition, academic literature in tourism emphasizes that networks can bring perceived benefits for host communities and their residents, such as innovation, knowledge sharing, local expertise integration, coordination and collaboration, destination development, and a sense of belonging [96–98].

Cultural associations' synergies based on specific criteria can create opportunities for novel local creative tourism networks. We examine three criteria of networking:

- a) the administrative criterion;
- b) the spatial criterion;
- c) the functional criterion.

a) Examining the administrative criterion, we notice that there are significant variations in the networking options of cultural associations. The Municipality Unit of Komotini gathers the majority of cultural associations (ten), in the Municipality Unit of Aigiros there are six cultural associations, while only three are found in the Municipality Unit of Neo Sidirochori (Figure 5). Networking based on administrative criteria could serve as a marketing tool to promote more synergies and cooperation between cultural organizations and regional stakeholders. Komotini, the capital city of the Municipality, gathering the majority of stakeholders (business planners and policy makers), may encourage more cultural associations through spillover effects. Cultural organizations in the Municipality Units of Aigiros and Neo Sidirochori show stronger dynamism than those in the Municipal Unit of Komotini (e.g., Cultural & Folklore Association of Women of Aigeiros, Educational and Cultural Association of Messouni, Women Cultural Association of Agioi Theodoroi). This benefits all areas, given that the cultural associations with the strongest potential can act as regional accelerators through the exchange of knowledge and information. Therefore, it is essential for local strategies and policies to take into account the specific characteristics of each area.

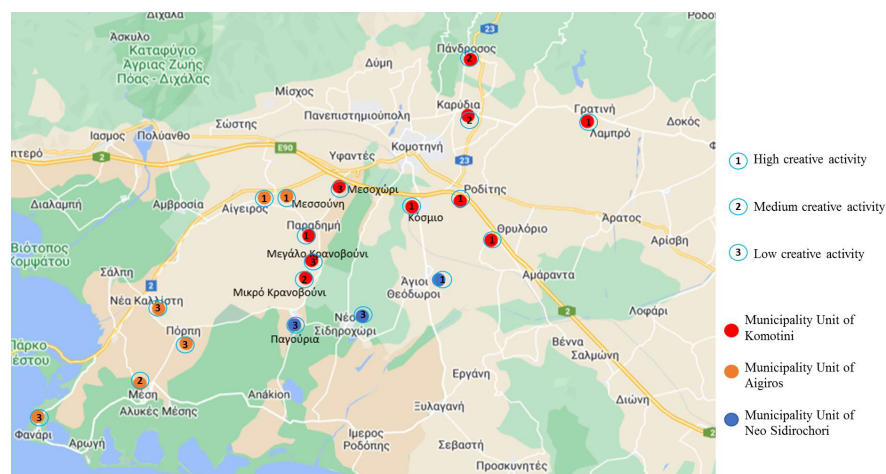


Figure 4. Level of the creative potential of Cultural Associations.

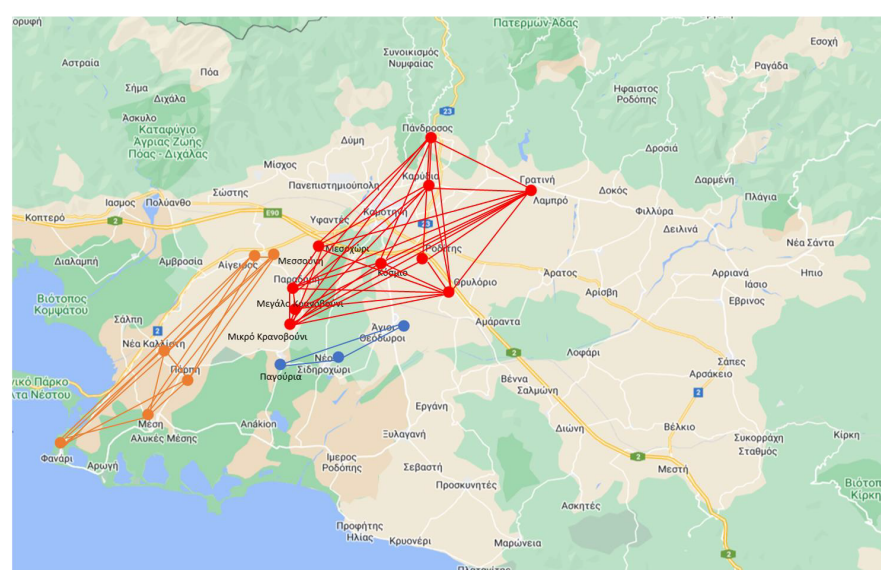


Figure 5. Networking based on the administrative criterion: Red network: Municipality Unit of Komotini, Orange network: Municipality Unit of Aigiros, Blue network: Municipality Unit of Neo Sidirochori.

b) Examining the spatial criterion, we notice that the area has weak connectivity and accessibility. Although the majority of cultural associations are located close to the capital of the Municipality, some are located in remote areas that are challenging to reach, due to geomorphological reasons (e.g., Gratini, Pandrossos, Fanari, Mesi). The main problems are poor road conditions (mainly provincial roads) and inadequate public transportation links, where several settlements lack daily public transportation connections. Thus, it is suggested to create networks within a 20-minute travel zone radius by local buses, which could improve the connectivity of cultural associations and lead to the establishment of novel creative routes (Figure 6).

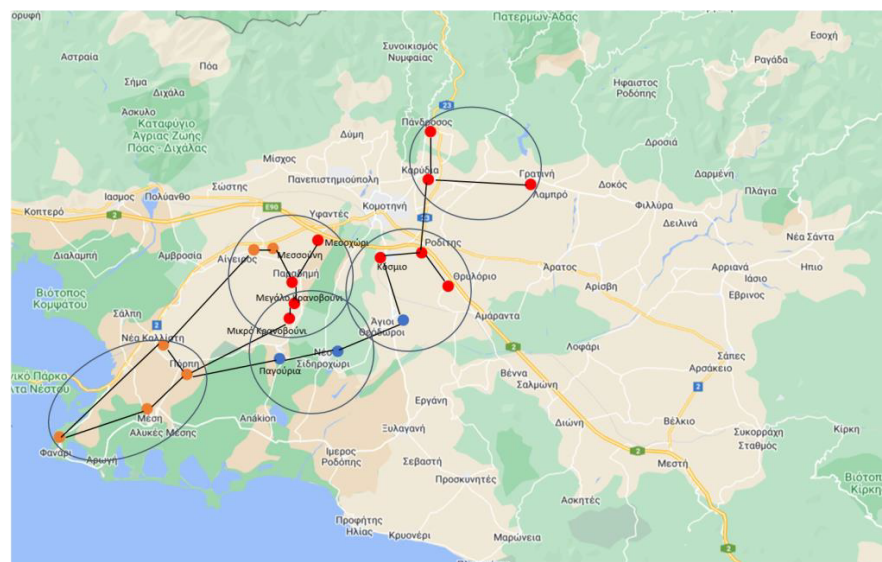


Figure 6. Networking based on the spatial criterion.

c) Considering the functional criterion, we notice that some creative activities can develop dense networks such as the arts, spirituality, arts and crafts, and creative routes/walks, while other activities develop sparse networks such as dialects, gastronomy, and sports (Figure 7). Connectivity-based activities could present a wide range of creative tourism opportunities and serve as a marketing tool for further network synergies and collaborative projects. These networks may bring together other types of local bodies, such as local businesses in the fields of gastronomy, handicrafts, and performing arts, as well as stakeholders in tourism, local government, and innovation. In addition, since the majority of creative activities of cultural associations take place from October to May, these networks can promote winter tourism, thus eliminating the barrier of seasonality.

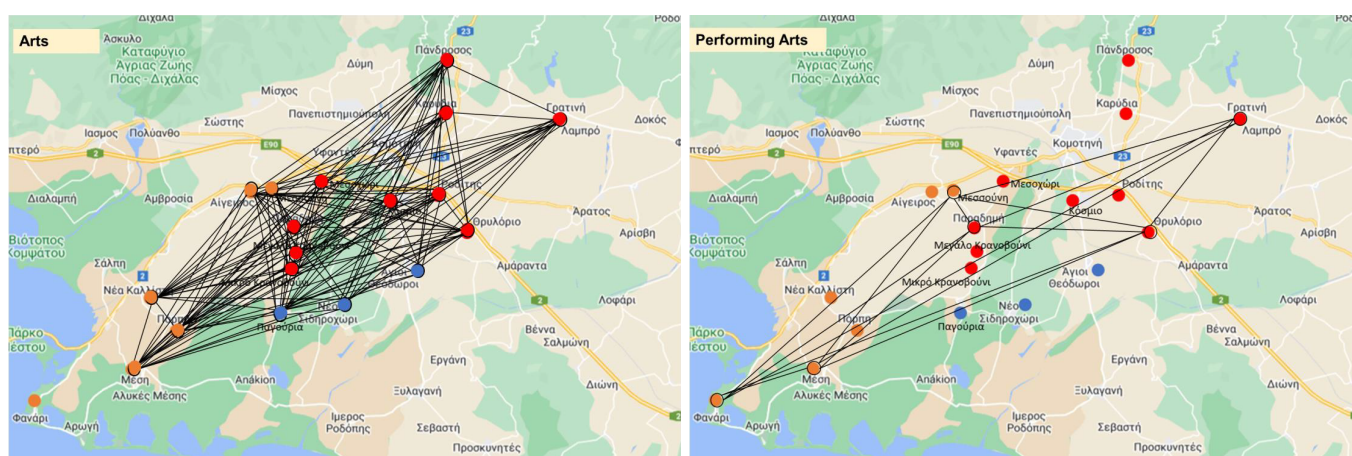


Figure 7. Networking based on the functional criterion.

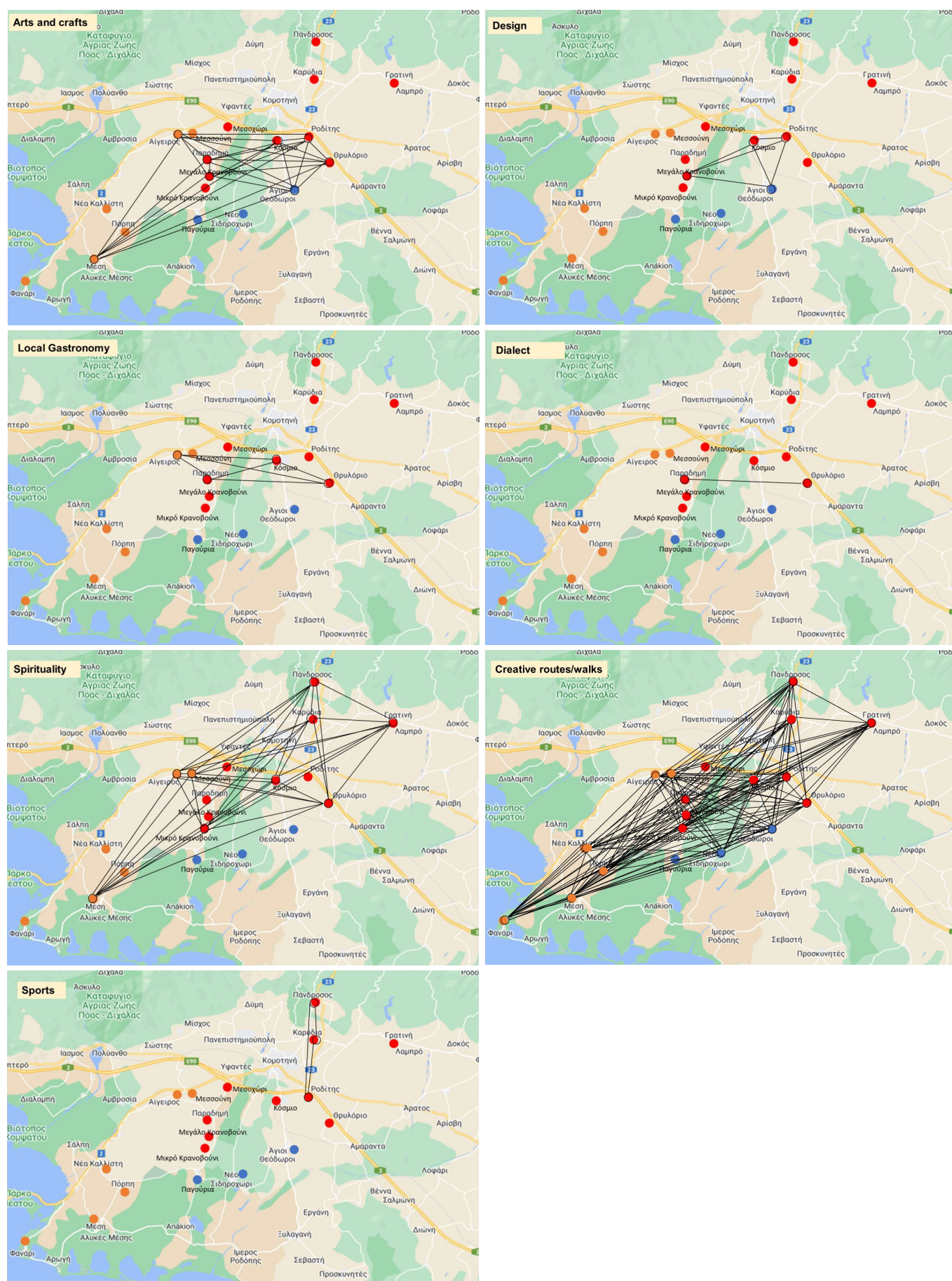


Figure 7. (Continued)

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study explores the potential for creative tourism development in peripheral areas using the regional creative capacity approach, arguing for its ability to explain the relationship between space and creativity. Academic researchers and regional development policy makers support and promote strategies designed to boost the cultural and creative sectors and work to ensure that culture is incorporated into public agendas and policies related to education, economy, environment, urban regeneration, social cohesion, public health and welfare, and international cooperation. While there has been a significant amount of academic research on the economic and social impacts of the creative-cultural industries in urban areas, the relevant literature for peripheral rural areas is rather limited. However, peripheral areas, despite being typically less developed and dependent mainly on agricultural activities, often have a rich cultural heritage and engage in activities that are rooted in the traditions and history of the place, define the identity of the place, and include various fields like music, the arts, theater, local events, cultural events, etc. Creativity and cultural heritage could be considered the “key” to the regeneration of peripheral communities, because they may boost local economic potential and vitality, encourage and promote tourism, and provide new development perspectives.

The role of cultural associations as a key factor in influencing regional creative capacity and enhancing tourism development in peripheral areas is examined in Greece. More specifically, the purpose of the study is to investigate whether the dynamics of cultural associations can act as a mechanism to promote creative tourism in Northern Greece’s peripheral communities using four creativity criteria: people, process, product, and environment. The main goal of the study is also to investigate networking opportunities of cultural associations based on three criteria: administrative, spatial and functional, and propose novel local creative tourism networks.

Research findings reveal a strong basis for the development of creative tourism over the study area, highlight opportunities for further action, and emphasize the value of networking. Cultural associations in the settlements of Komotini Municipality are a dynamic sector for tourism development in the area. A total of nineteen cultural associations with various creative activities (arts, performing arts, crafts, design, local gastronomy, dialect, spirituality, creative routes/walks, and sports) were identified throughout settlements with less than 5000 inhabitants. The majority of their staff were women who work on a volunteer basis.

It is noteworthy that local knowledge, history, customs, and traditions are passed on from one generation to the next by elderly locals who may not represent the typical Florida’s “creative class”, as is often the case in urban centers. Tourists’ visits to cultural associations and their capacity to engage and co-create with the authenticity and uniqueness of the place facilitate the creative process. However, it was observed that the connection between tourists and cultural associations does not occur within an organized framework for the promotion of tourism, but rather through personal acquaintances of the members of each cultural association. Finally, the environment is a critical element that could support the development of tourism and the operation of cultural industries. However, less favorable geographical conditions, inadequate transport links, limited tourism infrastructure, lack of resources, and shortage of skilled human resources were recorded within the study area.

Cultural associations exhibit vibrant cultural and artistic vitality, support a wide range of creative activities, and preserve the local identity, customs, and tangible and intangible cultural heritage. They could serve as significant contributors to local creative tourism development initiatives. However, peripheral areas continue to face several obstacles and need an ever-intensifying engagement with creativity and embodied participation of local stakeholders to encourage and support creative tourism and shape the identity of the traveler in the context of creative tourism. The study emphasizes the need for an effective framework for managing cultural and tourism resources, the establishment of an official body for the coordination/organization/management of the region’s creative capacity, and the creation of transfer of traditional knowledge and networking channels.

Funding

The implementation of the doctoral thesis was co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund-ESF) through the Operational Programme «Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning» in the context of the Act “Enhancing Human

Resources Research Potential by undertaking a Doctoral Research” Sub-action 2: IKY Scholarship Programme for PhD candidates in the Greek Universities.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge with sincere thanks and appreciation all the respondents who cooperatively answered the questionnaires. Also, they would like to express their deepest appreciation to reviewers for valuable comments in order to improve their study.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: S.M., & S.K.; Data curation: S.M.; Formal analysis: S.M., & S.K.; Funding acquisition: S.M.; Investigation: S.M.; Methodology: S.M., & S.K.; Project administration: S.M.; Resources: S.M.; Software: S.M.; Supervision: S.K.; Validation: S.M., & S.K.; Visualization: S.M., & S.K.; Writing – original draft: S.M., & S.K.; Writing – review & editing: S.K.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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