

# Storytelling in Sustainable Tourism Management: Challenges and Opportunities for Slovenia

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**Abstract**—In this paper the importance of storytelling in sustainable tourism management is introduced. It is argued that the development of storytelling as a destination marketing tool is related to the destination's creative potentials. We discuss storytelling as a tool for sustainable tourism management and as an opportunity for tourism growth in the period of the experience economy. Apart from several remarkable results, the analysis of key indicators of Slovenian tourism shows some gaps. Intangible cultural heritage and cultural tourism digital demand are found as two important obstacles for higher tourism competitiveness. The paper points to the importance of the systemic institutional support to cultural and creative industries development in Slovenia. In this regard the provision of possibilities for acquiring creative and digital skills in tourism marketing education and training, adapted to the contemporary economic paradigm, are emphasized. Through the upgrading of storytelling project, Slovenia could develop, link and promote heterogeneous existent intangible cultural heritage and raise its international recognisability.

**Index Terms**—creativity, creative tourism, storytelling, destination marketing, sustainable tourism, Slovenia

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades the tangible heritage as one of the major sources of tourism growth has been considerably supplemented by intangible aspects, based on creativity. Under the impact of experience economy [1] and creative economy [2; 3] the tourists and visitors search for authentic and engaging experiences and are eager to develop their own creativity through creative tourism [4].

### A. Creative Tourism and Creative Industries

With the increasing interest in intangible heritage, creative tourism satisfies the higher level need of self-actualization with a primary focus of active skill development [5]. The concept of creative tourism implies a level of co-creation between visitors and locals [4]. Creative tourism can be seen in numerous situations where visitors, service providers and the local community exchange ideas and skills and influence each other in a synergetic way. In this sense, it can be a means of involving tourists in the creative life of the destination, a creative means of using existing resources, a means of

strengthening identity and distinctiveness, a form of self-expression, a source of atmosphere for places and a source for recreating and reviving places [6]. Because creative tourism utilizes tourist resources that are processes in essence (e.g. dancing, singing, painting, gastronomy, festivals, crafts etc.), it promotes sustainability [7] and the creation of values [5]. For the tourism based on creativity there is no need to have a lot of built heritage, which demands expensive preservation and maintenance.

Due to the new dimensions of tourist demand and several positive effects of creative tourism, tourist destinations have started to take advantage of creative industries<sup>1</sup> to boost demand, stimulate innovation in tourism experiences, revitalize tourism products, add atmosphere to destinations and improve place image. The creative industries have been proved as a valuable source of content for tourism experiences, marketing and development. New collaborations between tourism organizations, media and advertising companies are evidenced in numerous good practices in the field of destination marketing [8].

### B. Storytelling in Tourism

Since contemporary tourists are inclined towards experiencing, learning and participating, they are not merely interested in buying the tourist product, but also in buying the stories behind the product [9]. Therefore, the storytelling, based on creativity and supported by new technologies, is becoming an effective destination marketing tool. With technology, the audience can join in the storytelling process, thus impacting positively on engagement and facilitating the development of long lasting relationships. New digital technologies, particularly the visually oriented social media, have facilitated new tourist experiences based on storytelling and offered new ways to develop and disseminate these experiences through social networks<sup>2</sup>.

In this paper the storytelling as a tool for sustainable tourism promotion is discussed. The research is based on the hypothesis that storytelling as a destination marketing

<sup>1</sup> Following OECD [8] the creative industries generate meaningful intangible cultural products, creative content and experiences. Advertising, animation, architecture, design, filming, gaming, gastronomy, music, performing arts, software and interactive games, television and radio are defined as the core sectors of creative industries.

<sup>2</sup> For digital storytelling see for example Robin [10]; Lambert [11]; Alcántud-Díaz, Vayá and Gregori-Signes [12].

tool is related to the country's cultural and creative potentials. The structure of the paper is the following: In the second section the role of storytelling in influencing tourism sustainability is introduced, in the third section the key indicators on Slovenian tourism are analyzed, in the fourth section, however, the challenges of storytelling in Slovenian tourism are presented. The fifth section comprises discussion, the last, however, is conclusion.

## II. STORYTELLING IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MANAGEMENT

### A. *Storytelling as a Destination Marketing Tool*

The successfulness of a destination marketing depends on developing and promoting a clear brand based on the core values of the destination. The development of new creative tourism products and experiences requires effective branding and brand support through content generation and storytelling. Creative storytelling is defined as the development of unique narratives able to 1) create a sense of community and belonging, 2) engage and interact with the audience, 3) transform followers in promoters, 4) inspire, show the creative process, ideas, invite the audience to be creative etc. [8].

Under a common brand, creative storytelling is used to more effectively communicate and sell the narratives and local characteristics of the area. Stories are used as the strategic marketing tool to support the development of a core marketing brand and to support tourist products and experiences development at a tourist destination, as the operative communication tool, however, they are used for creating messages and delivering them to target audiences. Storytelling has also become an important tool in regional development, helping to tie together images, identities and cultural resources into coherent visitor experiences.

### B. *Storytelling and Sustainability of Tourism*

In the interest of sustainability, the tourist destination brand and associated images (including pictures and text) should 1) be sufficiently strong to successfully command attention and generate new interest, 2) be sufficiently distinctive, to differentiate the destination from others, 3) match the values of the destination's target markets, 4) be authentic, i.e. it should relate to what visitors will actually find, 5) avoid stereotypes and images that may demean local communities and their values [13].

The primary functions of storytelling as a destination marketing tool for sustainable tourism management are the following [8]: 1) facilitating market access of all stakeholders, particularly smaller enterprises or community-based tourism initiatives with limited marketing resources, 2) promoting of particular forms of tourism or specific tourist products that are more sustainable than others, 3) promoting history, cultural heritage and traditions of the place, including implications both in terms of visitor interest and behavior, 4) promoting natural environment, including special qualities and sensitivities to certain activities, 5) reducing seasonality, by promoting off-season images and opportunities, 6) raising the use of more sustainable

transport, 7) maximizing value retained locally and 8) increasing spend per head and length of stay.

Once the storyline has been defined, storytellers and various stakeholders have to work on the dissemination process of the narratives. The transmedia approach<sup>3</sup> to the dissemination of stories in tourism offers the potential to reach wider audience and the opportunity of exploring the narratives throughout different languages and forms (film, text, photography, art).

## III. KEY INDICATORS OF SLOVENIAN TOURISM

The year 2016 is declared as another remarkable year for Slovenian tourism after the record year 2015 [14]. More than 9.4 % increase of total tourist arrivals is evidenced, whereby the number of foreign tourists arrivals increased by 11.4 %, the number of domestic tourists arrivals, however, by 5.1 %. The number of total tourists' overnights increased by 7.6 %; the number of foreign tourists' overnights was higher for 10.3 %, the number of domestic tourists' arrivals, however, by 2.8 %. Additionally, Slovenia gained some renowned recognitions in the field of tourism in the year 2016: it has become the world's first country to be declared a green destination according to an online Assessment & Reporting platform based upon the Global Sustainable Tourism Council's Destination Sustainability Criteria (GSTC-D) [15], the capital Ljubljana was awarded the European Green Capital 2016, the town Tolmin has been named Alpine Town of the Year 2016 for sustainable development and for strengthening the Alpine identity of the local population and Slovenia was ranked among 10 the most safest countries in the world according to Global Peace Index [16]. In the beginning of 2017 the Slovenian Tourist Board received the National Geographic's World Legacy Destination Leadership Award for encouraging sustainability of tourism in Slovenia [17]. All these recognitions are in line with Slovenia's strategic directions of tourism development, where sustainability of tourism<sup>4</sup> holds the key position [18].

Figure 1 shows that the economic impact of Travel and Tourism (T&T) industry in Slovenia as regards total contribution to GDP, total contribution to employment and visitor exports is larger than on average in Europe

<sup>3</sup> Transmedia storytelling (transmedia narrative, multiplatform storytelling, cross-media seriality) [19] is the technique of telling a single story or story experience across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies.

<sup>4</sup> The sustainable tourism is achieved when (1) the environmental resources are optimally used (maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural resources and biodiversity), (2) the sociocultural authenticity of host communities is respected (conserving built and living cultural heritage and traditional values and contributing to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance), and (3) viable, long-term economic operations are ensured (providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed) [13]. Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raise their awareness about sustainability issues and promote sustainable practices among them. Making tourism more sustainable means taking its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts into account in the planning, development and operation of tourism [20].

and in the world. This larger impact is consistent with higher share of capital investment in T&T sector in Slovenia in comparison to European and the world average. However, the share of spending for tourism in GDP by residents of Slovenia is lower than on average in Europe and in the world. Concerning spending on leisure travel and spending on business travel, the first one is higher and the second one is lower in Slovenia than on average in Europe and in the world.

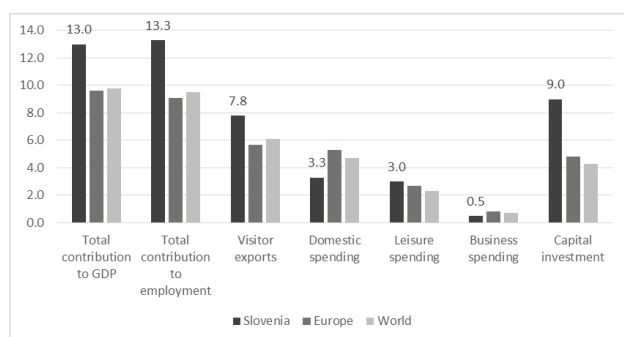


Figure 1. T&T Economic Impact in Slovenia (% of GDP, 2015)

Source: [21].

Notes: Total contribution to GDP: GDP generated directly by the Travel & Tourism (T&T) sector plus T&T indirect and induced impacts; Total contribution to employment: The number of jobs generated directly in the T & T sector plus the indirect and induced contributions; Visitor exports: Spending within a country by international tourists for both business and leisure trips, including spending on transport, but excluding international spending on education; Domestic spending: Spending within a country by that country's residents for both business and leisure trips. Leisure spending: Spending on leisure travel within a country by residents and international visitors; Business spending: Spending on business travel within a country by residents and international visitors; Capital investment: Capital investment spending by all industries directly involved in T&T.

### C. International Competitiveness of Slovenian Tourism

High T&T economic impact in Slovenia in comparison to the European and the world average indicates quite good competitiveness of Slovenian T&T industry. Slovenia ranks as 41st among 136 observed countries in the World Economic Forum's T&T Competitiveness Index 2017 [22]. The most advantageous areas are safety and security, health and hygiene, tourist service infrastructure, ICT readiness and environmental sustainability. The largest gaps in competitiveness of T&T in Slovenia are found in the domains of air transport infrastructure, international openness, cultural resources and business travel (Figure 2). As regards international openness the most disadvantageous dimensions are openness of bilateral air service agreements (index measuring the average openness of air service agreements) and visa requirements for entry in the destination country for a tourism visit of a limited duration from worldwide source markets, where Slovenia ranks as 128<sup>th</sup> and 73<sup>rd</sup>, respectively, among 136 countries. In the domain of air transport infrastructure the most problematic dimensions are number of operating airlines with scheduled flights originating in country and the scheduled available international seat kilometers originating in country per week (year average), where Slovenia ranks as 114<sup>th</sup> and 123<sup>rd</sup>, respectively, among 136 countries. The most

disadvantageous dimensions within cultural resources and business travel, which are relatively less related to the size of the country, are cultural and entertainment tourism digital demand (number of online searches index) and oral and intangible cultural heritage (number of oral and intangible cultural heritage practices and expressions) where Slovenia ranks as 98<sup>th</sup> and 71<sup>st</sup>, respectively, among 136 countries.

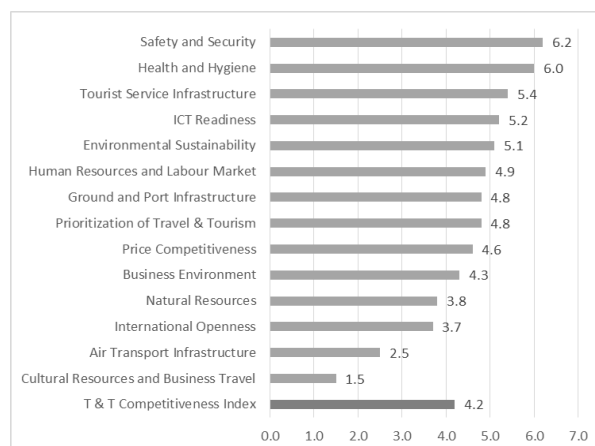


Figure 2. The T&T Competitiveness in Slovenia (2017) (index scores from 1 to 7)

Source: [22].

### D. Slovenian Digital Country Ranking

Since nowadays the primary way of searching for information is by way of a "search engine", "searches" represent the level of interest in a country and therefore demonstrate a country's brand appeal. In this regard it is very important how a country's brand is perceived by possible visitors and tourists. The Digital Country Index [23] measures the brand appeal of 180 countries in the digital world according to 5 specific dimensions (tourism, talent, investment, exports and national prominence), whereby a set of performance indicators measure the impact of a country's branding strategy within each of the five dimensions. The methodology relies on a technique that uses D2 © tool, measuring the online demand for a specific country by target audience, as well as indicators of economic impact. For the Country Brand ranking in the field of tourism, online demand for tourism in a specific destination, as well as tourism revenues, are measured [24]. The Country Brand Ranking in the field of tourism is measured by 4 groups of variables: economic performance, digital demand, Country Brand Strategy (CBS) rating and online performance of National Tourist Organization (NTO).

According to the Digital Country Index 2017, 63 % of all digital search for Slovenia is made in the field of tourism dimension. Within this digital search, 45 % achieve searches for general information, 30 % leisure and entertainment, 21 % outdoor and nature, 2 % niche markets and 2 % cultural assets. Altogether, Slovenia ranks as 76<sup>th</sup> according to the Digital Demand in the field of tourism, and as 68<sup>th</sup> in the world and 26<sup>th</sup> among European countries as regards the Country Brand Index in the tourism dimension. Slovenia's Country Brand

Strategy (CBS) is ranked as very strong. Although Slovenia's position in the tourism dimension of its country brand is the highest among the other dimensions of its country brand (investment, exports, talent and national prominence) according to Digital Country Index 2017, there are still some gaps that could be lessened, as for example the volumes of digital search for niche markets<sup>5</sup> and cultural assets<sup>6</sup> in Slovenia, that are very low.

#### IV. STORYTELLING IN SLOVENIAN TOURISM

##### A. The Pyramid of Stories in Slovenian Tourism

In 2013 the Slovenian Tourist Board launched the project "Stories in Slovenian Tourism" [25]. The purpose of this project was (1) to analyze the situation in the field of stories in Slovenia – from local and regional to the national level, (2) to develop "the pyramid of stories in Slovenian tourism," and (3) to encourage all major stakeholders to use storytelling as a strategic marketing and operative communication tool with the aim of increasing the competitive edge of tourist products and destinations. The aims of the pyramid of stories were (1) to develop a clear system for development and communication of stories in tourism, (2) to classify certain types of stories at particular levels of the pyramid and establish priorities in storytelling and (3) to encourage stakeholders at the lower levels of the pyramid (regions, destinations, companies, individuals) to develop stories and integrate them upwards. The pyramid represents the platform for communicating what are Slovenia's unique offerings and advantages and the framework for the development of stories at the levels of regions, destinations, companies and individuals.

##### B. The Core Story of Slovenian National Brand

At the top of the pyramid is the core story behind the national brand of Slovenia "I feel Slovenia. Green, Active, Healthy" (see Figure 3). The word "feel" in the brand is connected to the statement, that Slovenia cannot be encapsulated only by an image, it has to be felt and experienced with all senses. The story of the brand in the field of tourism is connected to colour green, which is related to nature and elementary quality, be it water, the smell of the forest or the genuine taste of food, and as such understood as calming but exciting. The harmony of the senses with which visitors and tourists experience Slovenian green calms them and makes them lively at the same time. Holidays in Slovenia help visitors and tourists to regain balance. Thus, the word "green" in Slovenian country brand is connected with forests, waters and principles. There are namely over 20,000 animal and plant species on slightly more than 20,000 sq. km of territory. Over one third of Slovenia is included in

the Natura 2000 network – a European network of special protected areas that were chosen by European Union members in order to preserve important biological diversity in Europe. Slovenia is the third most forested country in Europe and according to the amount of river water per inhabitant, among the water richest countries in Europe. Slovenia carefully preserves its natural richness, which is a feature of all Slovenian regions [26].

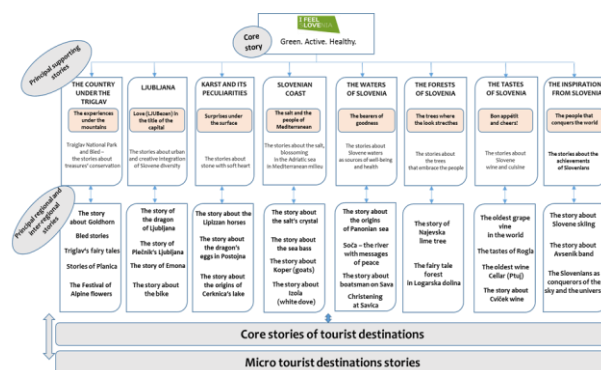


Figure 3. The pyramid of stories in Slovenian tourism  
Sources: [27;28].

The word "active" is related to numerous opportunities offered to visitors and tourists in Slovenia to experience outdoor activities. The north of the country is dominated by towering mountain ranges that provide plentiful challenges for hikers and skiers. In the west, pure Alpine streams strengthen as they descend into the valleys, becoming churning white-water rapids, ideal for rafting and canyoning. Elsewhere, picturesque lakeside paths provide perfect terrain for cyclists and the lush fields of the Karst are home to a rare breed of white stallion – the Lipizzaner horse [26]. Additionally, Slovenia offers experiences beneath of surface. Over 10,000 karst caves are located beneath the surface of Slovenia. The Postojna Cave with all its passages, galleries and halls provides a unique setting for various events, from art performances, gala dinners to various cave experiences. The Vilenica Cave is the oldest show cave in Europe. Tourists have been visiting it since 1633. Every year the Vilenica international literary prize is awarded in the cave's 'Ballroom'. The Škocjan Caves remain the only monument at the Classical Karst region on UNESCO's list of natural and cultural world heritage sites. Thus, they hold a significant position among the world's natural monuments.

The word "healthy" is related to healing, invigorating and nourishing that can be experienced in Slovenia. The secret of health and well-being lies in 87 natural thermal springs. The water, climate and other factors are the core of the offer of the 15 certified natural spa resorts. The thermal and mineral waters in Slovenia have been the source of health for centuries. Slovenia is equally proud of its traditional Slovenian cuisine, with particular acclaim to wine region Goriška Brda, a European Destination of Excellence 2015. Slovenia has 24 gastronomic regions and 3 winegrowing regions, which

<sup>5</sup> Examples of niche markets in the field of tourism are medical tourism, luxury tourism, protected areas, animal watching, city tourism, cruises, language courses, religious tourism and rural tourism [24].

<sup>6</sup> Examples of cultural assets in the field of tourism are local gastronomy, local people, local traditions, performing arts, historical sites, museums, UNESCO heritage [24].

are ranked among the 3 to 5 % of the best locations in the world.

According to STB [28] the key advantages of storytelling in Slovenian tourism is strong identity of core brand with high communication potential and its good appeal at international markets. As the key disadvantages STB lists the following: the majority of stories are not yet developed (with all necessary elements of stories), there are many stories that are not yet developed as tourist products, there are many tourist products that lack stories, the pyramids of stories for regions and destinations have not been set yet, several stories do not fulfil a lot of important stories' criteria, the stories lack emotional and experiential components, there is a lack of up-to-date stories, few opportunities are recognized to link tourism with other areas, there is a lack of experiential knowledge in the field of storytelling, there is a lack of strategic approach towards development of stories and their usage as strategic marketing tools, the existent stories are not supported with qualitative visual elements, often the professionals are not included in the development of stories and there is a lack of storytellers.

## V. DISCUSSION

Sustainability of tourism holds the key position in Slovenian strategic directions of tourism development. Remarkable numbers of total tourist arrivals and overnights, relatively high economic impacts of tourism, relatively good T&T competitiveness and tourism Digital Country Brand positions, as well as some renowned recognitions in the field of tourism in the previous years indicate that Slovenia is well on the way to fulfil its key strategic goal. However, low international competitiveness positions of Slovenian T&T in the field of intangible cultural heritage and cultural entertainment tourism digital demand are important threats that could decelerate the favorable dynamics in the development of Slovenian tourism. By systemic support to the emergence and development of creative potentials<sup>7</sup>, Slovenian tourism would gain additional benefits. Supporting the emergence and development of creative potentials is one of the biggest opportunities for Slovenian tourism, since its comparative advantages in the field of tangible cultural heritage are relatively low. A step forward in this regard represents the web portal Bank of Tourism Potentials in Slovenia [32] with Snovalec and Sejalec awards that promote creativity, inventiveness and innovativeness in Slovenian tourism.

Slovenia has heterogeneous intangible cultural heritage of skills in arts and crafts and culinary tradition. This type

of intangible cultural and natural heritage should be turned into competitive advantages of Slovenian tourism via creative tourism development. Due to the well-established high economic potentials and advantages of creative and cultural industries for the sustainable development of societies [33], as well as European Commission's budget support for these sectors until the year 2020<sup>8</sup>, Slovenian entrepreneurship and tourism policymakers should strive to support creative entrepreneurship and to form an initiative for creative tourism development. The necessary institutional support for creative tourism development could arise from examples of good practice of individual countries or towns. The appeal for new ideas in tourism should be more target-oriented – towards new ideas about learning skills on holidays – and promoted among the broadest public. There should be also some discussions with different tourism operators (hotels) and cultural institutions (museums, galleries) about the possibilities of their involvement in creative tourism as creative tourism providers. Local tourist boards should be given a significant role in this initiative as important partners in the dissemination of information and new ideas in this field. It has to be recognized that the creative tourism value is created by multiple stakeholders involved in the destination narrative development in an open network-based structure [35].

Slovenia should strengthen its recognisability of the tourism dimension of its Country Brand in more focused areas of its tourism offer. In the field of cultural assets this could be local gastronomy, local traditions and performing arts. In 2016 some steps towards greater recognisability of Slovenian gastronomy by so-called special culinary tour have been made already. In strengthening its recognisability Slovenia should take advantage of digital and transmedia storytelling in tourism. Slovenia has established a very good analytical basis for storytelling in tourism, however, STB SWOT analysis has shown that it lacks creative potentials in the field of stories' development and marketing. This finding is in line with gaps of Slovenian T&T competitiveness in the field of cultural resources that are part of creative industries. Hereby we can confirm the hypothesis of this research.

Slovenian policymakers have to be aware that since social media intensifies and accelerates the distribution of images, ideas and associations that shape perception, country's economic, social and political changes can influence country brand strength year to year. Such a systemic nature of a country brand in all its dimensions calls upon the improvement of Slovenian competitiveness positions and upon careful management as well as continuous relative assessment of a country brand.

## VI. CONCLUSION

<sup>7</sup> The share of employees in cultural and creative industries (CCIs) in Slovenia amounted 3.33 % in 2010 [29], which positioned Slovenia on the 27th place among 30 European countries. According to this research, Slovenian CCIs were concentrated in two regions – the Osrednjeslovenska region with 43.4% of all CCIs enterprises and the Podravska region with 13.3% of all CCI enterprises. Further analysis [30; 31] has shown that policy measures for the development of CCIs in Slovenia have been focused only on traditional art fields and cultural industries and not to the related CCIs activities.

<sup>8</sup> See 'Creative Europe - A new framework programme for the cultural and creative sectors (2014-2020)' [34].

In view of the fact that creativity has been proven to be an important tool for the achievement of competitiveness and herewith sustainability in 21st century, it is necessary that Slovenia engages in a firm declarative institutional support in the field of the formation of creativity and its dissemination into various domains of the economy. This is even more important with regard to several European Union's financial initiatives for the development of creative societies. Policy has a crucial role in providing appropriate conditions for the enhancement of creativity and herewith creative tourism. Slovenian policymakers have to set up efficient mechanisms which would stimulate creativity, creative capabilities and innovation and help spread the enablers of creativity more equally. Policy measures should be directed towards the improvement of competitive position of cultural and creative products and services. Culture must be seen as a resource for creativity by policy makers and be given greater prominence in the broader policies. Policymakers should give a greater value to imagination and disruptive creative thoughts via the promotion of art and culture in lifelong learning, the recognition of the value of alternative education methods whose focus is on the development of individual creativity, the encouraging of interdisciplinary activities at university level and creative partnerships between educational, cultural and entrepreneurial activities. The attention should be also given to the creative and cultural industries' access to finance, to the establishment of creative clusters and the development of creative entrepreneurship. The support to the development of creative storytelling and to the development of capabilities for narratives' dissemination through digital media (transmedia storytelling) should be considered as a part of the overall institutional support to cultural and creative industries. In this regard, the possibilities for acquiring creative and digital skills through education and training are essential.

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