



Digitalization and the Economic Valorization of Heritage Capital : Towards Sustainable Place Branding

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Abstract

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Cultural and natural heritage constitutes a strategic component of territorial capital, whose economic valorization depends on the ability of territories to mobilize innovative tools. In this context, digitalization emerges as a key driver for transforming heritage resources into sustainable economic assets. This paper examines this process through the case of the city of Chefchaouen, characterized by a strong visual identity and a tourist attractiveness enhanced by digital platforms. The objective is to analyze the mechanisms through which digital technologies strengthen territorial attractiveness and contribute to the development of sustainable place branding. The methodology is based on an approach combining a conceptual framework and an empirical analysis grounded in the evolution of digital visibility and tourist flows over the period 2019-2024. The findings indicate that digitalization improves territorial visibility and fosters local economic value creation, provided that coherent digital governance is implemented.

I. Introduction

In the contemporary economy, cultural and natural heritage represents a strategic component of territorial capital. However, its economic valorization no longer depends solely on its intrinsic value, but rather on the capacity of local actors to mobilize innovative tools in order to transform these resources into value-generating assets [1]. Within this framework, digitalization emerges as a key driver of transformation, enhancing territorial attractiveness within a sustainable development perspective.

The case of the city of Chefchaouen provides a particularly relevant illustration of this dynamic. Characterized by a strong visual identity - most notably its distinctive "blue color" - the city has gained increased visibility through digital platforms and social media. This digital exposure contributes significantly to its tourist attractiveness, while also raising the issue of how such visibility can be structured to maximize local economic benefits, in line with the development of a coherent territorial image [2].

The aim of this paper is to analyze the mechanisms through which digital technologies contribute to the economic valorization of heritage capital and to the development of sustainable place branding. The approach adopted combines a conceptual framework with an empirical analysis based on the evolution of digital visibility and tourist flows in Chefchaouen over the period 2019-2024. This analysis provides insights into the role of digitalization in shaping contemporary territorial dynamics.

II. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach with an analytical focus, combining a conceptual framework with an empirical case study [3]. The objective is to examine the impact of digitalization on the territorial economic dynamics of Chefchaouen, with particular emphasis on two key dimensions: digital visibility and tourist attractiveness.

a. Data collections and sources

The analysis is based on secondary data covering the period 2019–2024. Data related to tourist activity (arrivals and overnight stays) are derived from institutional reports, particularly those published by the Observatoire du Tourisme and regional sources. In parallel, the digital visibility of the territory is assessed through indirect indicators, including online search trends (Google Trends) and the presence of the destination across digital and tourism-related platforms.

b. Data processing and analysis

The data are analyzed using a comparative approach aimed at identifying the joint evolution of digital visibility and tourist attractiveness. This method allows for the examination of interactions between digitalization and the economic valorization of the territory.

The analysis relies on a qualitative interpretation of observed trends, without resorting to complex econometric models. It aims to assess how digital tools contribute to transforming heritage capital into economic assets through mechanisms related to visibility enhancement, increased attractiveness, and territorial value creation.

III. Results and discussion

The analysis of data related to the city of Chefchaouen highlights a significant relationship between the territory's digital visibility and its tourist attractiveness over the period 2019-2024. This dynamic takes place in a context where digital platforms are playing an increasingly important role in tourists' destination choices.

First, the observation of search trends and social media presence reveals a notable increase in Chefchaouen's digital visibility. The widespread dissemination of images associated with the city's visual identity - particularly its distinctive "blue color" - has strengthened its positioning as a unique tourist destination.

This trend is supported by the rapid digital expansion in Morocco, which recorded more than 25 million active social media users in 2024 [4]. This increased visibility represents a key driver of place branding, facilitating the international recognition of the territory.

Second, the rise in digital visibility is accompanied by an increase in tourist flows, as reflected in data on arrivals and overnight stays. At the national level, tourism value added reached a record of 96.4 billion dirhams in 2024, representing a 37% increase compared to 2019 [5]. Although this relationship cannot be interpreted as strictly causal, it suggests a positive interaction between digitalization and territorial attractiveness.

Periods of high digital exposure generally coincide with an intensification of tourist flows, indicating an amplifying effect of digital tools, as highlighted in previous studies on the role of digital media in shaping tourist behavior [6].

Furthermore, digitalization contributes to enhancing the tourist experience by facilitating access to information, trip planning, and the promotion of local resources. It also supports economic value creation through increased tourist spending and the development of local activities related to tourism, in line with the broader dynamics of digital transformation observed in the global tourism sector [7].

However, these positive effects remain dependent on the ability of territorial stakeholders to effectively structure this digital visibility. The lack of coordination among local initiatives may limit economic benefits and reinforce certain imbalances, particularly in terms of income distribution within the tourism sector. Therefore, the implementation of a coherent digital governance framework appears to be a key factor in transforming digital visibility into a sustainable driver of territorial development.

IV. Conclusion

This study highlights the decisive role of digitalization in the economic valorization of heritage capital and the strengthening of territorial attractiveness. Through the case of Chefchaouen, the findings show that digital visibility constitutes a key driver of value creation by enhancing the territory's positioning in the tourism market.

However, this dynamic remains dependent on the ability of local stakeholders to establish an appropriate territorial governance framework, in order to manage tourist flows and preserve heritage resources. Therefore, digitalization should not be viewed solely as a promotional tool, but rather as a strategic instrument for sustainable development.

In the future, strengthening integrated management mechanisms and the use of advanced digital tools could further optimize economic benefits while ensuring the long-term sustainability of territorial capital.

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