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Sustainable Mobility and Tourism Development: Opportunities for the Shkodra Destination

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of sustainable mobility in supporting tourism development in the Shkodra region of northern Albania. The region combines urban, cultural, lake, coastal, mountain, river, and rural tourism resources, creating a diverse destination structure that depends heavily on the quality of mobility connections between its different parts. Drawing on a review of academic literature on sustainable tourism, public transport, cycling, walkability, and visitor experience, combined with systematic field observation conducted over approximately six months at official public transport stops designated by the Municipality of Shkodra and informal conversations with residents who regularly use public transport, the paper analyzes the current mobility conditions and their implications for tourism development and community quality of life. The findings reveal a significant gap between the formal availability of public transport services and their real usability for tourists and residents. Key challenges include limited urban public transport coverage, structural disconnections between the urban line and mountain and rural terminals, low service frequency on lake connections, narrow departure windows for mountain destinations, passenger-dependent departures on several routes, absent evening services, and incomplete digital address identification. At the same time, the region has important foundations for a more sustainable mobility model, including a strong cycling tradition, a walkable urban structure, ongoing infrastructure improvements, and a diverse tourism offer. The paper provides recommendations for improving public transport reliability, expanding cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, integrating mobility and tourism planning, and developing financial mechanisms to support sustainable mobility. It argues that sustainable mobility should be understood not as a cost but as one of the most important enabling conditions for competitive, inclusive, and sustainable destination development.

Keywords: sustainable mobility, tourism development, public transport, cycling, Shkodra, destination management, visitor experience

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Tourism in Albania has experienced rapid growth during the last decade, becoming one of the country's most important economic sectors and contributing significantly to local development and international visibility. Increasing international interest in Albania as an affordable and authentic destination has generated new opportunities for both established and emerging tourism regions. In this context, the Shkodra region has gained increasing attention due to its combination of natural landscapes, cultural heritage, urban identity, and strategic geographic position.

The region offers a diverse tourism product that includes mountain tourism, lake tourism, cultural tourism, and coastal tourism. Destinations such as Theth National Park and Velipojë Beach continue to attract growing numbers of domestic and international visitors, while areas such as Shirokë, Zogaj, and the Liqeni i Vaut të Dejës are gradually emerging as complementary tourism spaces with further development potential. At the same time, the city of Shkodër has strengthened its role not only as a transit point, but also as an important urban and cultural destination that supports regional tourism activity.

The growing diversification of tourism activities has increased the importance of mobility and accessibility within the region. Tourists increasingly seek flexible and sustainable ways to move between urban areas, natural attractions, and smaller tourism destinations. This creates growing pressure on existing mobility systems and highlights the importance of sustainable transport solutions such as public transport, cycling infrastructure, and walkable urban spaces.

In recent years, local authorities have initiated several interventions related to road infrastructure and cycling facilities, reflecting increasing awareness of sustainable urban mobility. However, the pace of tourism growth and the expanding spatial distribution of tourism activities create challenges that require more integrated and long-term planning approaches. Sustainable mobility is therefore becoming an important element not only for transport management, but also for tourism development, visitor experience, environmental sustainability, and the quality of life of local communities.

1.2 Problem Statement

The rapid growth of tourism in the Shkodra region has increased the need for more efficient, accessible, and sustainable mobility systems. As tourism activity becomes more diversified across the city, lake areas, coastal zones, mountain destinations, and emerging attractions, visitors increasingly require reliable ways to move between different points of interest. However, the development of mobility infrastructure and services has not fully kept pace with this growing and changing demand.

One of the main challenges is the increasing dependence on private vehicles, both by residents and visitors. This dependence contributes to heavier traffic, especially during peak periods, weekends, and the high tourism season. As vehicle traffic increases, movement within urban and tourism areas becomes more difficult, not only for cars but also for pedestrians, cyclists, public transport users, and other low-impact mobility forms. In this sense, congestion does not only affect road efficiency; it also reduces the safety, comfort, and attractiveness of sustainable mobility options.

The limited integration of public transport, cycling infrastructure, pedestrian routes, and tourism planning creates additional barriers for both tourists and local communities. For tourists, weak mobility connections can limit access to different attractions and reduce the possibility of combining urban, cultural, natural, and recreational experiences within the same visit. More broadly, the quality of mobility has a direct influence on the visitor experience and tourist satisfaction, as accessible, reliable, safe, and comfortable movement can increase the attractiveness of a destination and encourage visitors to explore it more fully. For local residents, improved mobility can contribute to everyday convenience, better access to services, reduced travel stress, and a higher quality of urban life. In contrast, increased traffic and car dependency may negatively affect quality of life through congestion, noise, pressure on public spaces, and potential deterioration of urban air quality, particularly in central and highly frequented areas.

Although recent interventions in road and cycling infrastructure indicate progress, the scale of mobility challenges remains significant. The main problem is therefore not only the lack of transport infrastructure, but the absence of a fully integrated mobility approach that supports tourism development, visitor experience, environmental sustainability, and community well-being. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring that tourism growth in the Shkodra region develops in a more balanced, accessible, and sustainable way.

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this paper is to examine the role of sustainable mobility in supporting tourism development in the Shkodra region, with particular attention to accessibility, visitor experience, community quality of life, and the integration of urban and regional tourism spaces.

More specifically, the paper seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To analyze the relationship between tourism growth and increasing mobility demand in the Shkodra region.
- To identify the main mobility-related challenges affecting tourists and local communities, including traffic congestion, car dependency, accessibility limitations, and pressure on urban and environmental quality.
- To examine the potential contribution of sustainable mobility forms, such as public transport, cycling, and walkability, to improving visitor experience and resident well-being.
- To explore how better mobility integration can support the diversification of tourism experiences across the city of Shkodra and surrounding destinations.
- To provide recommendations for integrating sustainable mobility more effectively into tourism and urban planning in the Shkodra region.

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the aim and objectives of the study, this paper is guided by the following research questions:

- How is tourism growth influencing mobility demand in the Shkodra region?
- What are the main mobility-related challenges affecting tourists and local communities in the region?
- How can sustainable mobility forms, such as public transport, cycling, and walkability, contribute to improving visitor experience and community quality of life?
- How can better integration of mobility and tourism planning support a more balanced and sustainable development of the Shkodra destination?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sustainable Tourism and Mobility

Sustainable tourism development is commonly understood as a development approach that seeks to balance economic growth, environmental protection, and socio-cultural well-being. In this perspective, tourism should not be evaluated only through the number of visitors or the direct economic benefits it generates, but also through its long-term effects on destinations, local communities, natural resources, and the quality of the visitor experience. As destinations grow, the pressure created by tourism becomes increasingly visible in infrastructure, public spaces, transport systems, environmental quality, and everyday life for residents.

Mobility is a central component of this discussion because tourism is fundamentally dependent on movement. Tourists need to access the destination, move within it, connect different attractions, and combine various experiences during their stay. For this reason, transport and mobility are not simply supporting services, but essential elements of destination competitiveness and

sustainability. A destination may offer valuable natural, cultural, and urban attractions, but if movement between them is difficult, unreliable, unsafe, or uncomfortable, the overall visitor experience may be negatively affected.

The literature shows that the relationship between tourism and mobility is particularly important at the destination level. Le-Klähn and Hall (2015) argue that understanding tourists' use of public transport at destinations is important not only for sustainable mobility, but also for destination satisfaction, public transport management, and destination management. Their review also shows that tourist use of public transport differs between urban and rural destinations, with public transport generally having stronger potential in urban contexts, while remote or peripheral areas remain more challenging.

This distinction is highly relevant for destinations that combine urban, natural, coastal, and rural tourism spaces, such as the Shkodra region. In such contexts, sustainable mobility cannot be limited to the internal movement of tourists within the city. It must also include the capacity to connect the city with surrounding attractions and emerging tourism areas. Sustainable mobility therefore involves public transport, cycling, walking, intermodal connections, information systems, and planning approaches that allow residents and visitors to move more efficiently while reducing excessive dependence on private vehicles.

Transport quality is also closely linked to tourist satisfaction. Le-Klähn, Hall, and Gerike (2014), in their study on visitor satisfaction with public transport in Munich, identify travelling comfort, service quality, accessibility, and additional features as important dimensions influencing visitors' satisfaction with public transport services. This suggests that mobility affects not only the practical movement of tourists, but also the way they perceive and evaluate the destination as a whole. Reliable, accessible, and comfortable mobility can encourage visitors to explore more places, extend their activities within the destination, and form a more positive impression of the region.

Active forms of mobility, especially walking and cycling, are also important within sustainable tourism. Hall and Ram (2019) emphasize that walking is an important part of the tourist experience and a significant element of sustainable mobility, although they also note that walkability should be assessed from a tourism-specific perspective. This is important because the mobility needs of tourists may differ from those of residents. Tourists often require clear routes, safe pedestrian environments, readable public spaces, access to attractions, and information that allows them to navigate unfamiliar urban and regional environments.

Cycling tourism and cycling infrastructure add another important dimension. Gazzola et al. (2018) describe cycle tourism as a concrete expression of sustainable tourism, particularly because it allows visitors to discover territories with relatively low consumption of natural resources and a stronger connection with the landscape. Their study also highlights that cycle tourism can generate economic, social, and environmental benefits, especially in areas that are less affected by mass tourism. For destinations with short distances, diverse landscapes, and emerging tourism areas, cycling can therefore support both sustainable mobility and spatial diversification of tourism activity.

However, the transition toward sustainable mobility is complex. Scuttari et al. (2016) argue that sustainable mobility in tourism destinations requires more than infrastructure; it involves governance, stakeholder coordination, adaptive capacity, and the management of uncertain visitor flows. They conceptualize destinations as complex systems in which tourism, transport, social, ecological, technical, and political subsystems interact with each other. This means that sustainable mobility cannot be treated as a separate transport issue. It must be integrated into broader destination planning and management.

In this paper, sustainable mobility is therefore understood as a strategic component of tourism development. It contributes to accessibility, visitor experience, environmental protection, and community quality of life. In growing destinations, the absence of integrated mobility planning can increase car dependency, congestion, noise, pressure on public spaces, and potential deterioration of air quality. In contrast, well-planned sustainable mobility can help distribute visitors more evenly, improve access to cultural and natural attractions, support local communities, and strengthen the image of the destination as accessible, livable, and environmentally responsible.

2.2 Public Transport, Cycling, and Walkability in Tourism Destinations

Public transport, cycling, and walkability are among the most important components of sustainable mobility in tourism destinations. Together, they offer alternatives to private car dependence and can improve accessibility, reduce congestion, support environmental objectives, and enhance the visitor experience. In destinations experiencing tourism growth, these mobility forms are particularly relevant because they influence how visitors move, what places they are able to access, how much time they spend in different areas, and how they evaluate the destination.

Public transport plays a key role in connecting tourists with attractions, accommodation areas, urban centers, and surrounding destinations. Le-Klähn and Hall (2015) emphasize that public transport use by tourists is relevant not only for sustainable mobility, but also for destination satisfaction and destination management. However, their review shows that the potential of public transport depends strongly on the type of destination, the quality of services, tourist motivations, and the availability of visitor-oriented information. In urban destinations, public transport may be more attractive because routes, frequencies, and information systems are usually more developed. In rural or peripheral areas, however, limited services and weaker connections may reduce its use by visitors.

The decision of tourists to use public transport at the destination is also influenced by their travel behavior before arrival. Gutiérrez and Miravet (2016), in their study of Costa Daurada in Catalonia, found that tourists arriving by private car were less likely

to use public transport during their stay, while those arriving by plane were more likely to use it. This finding is important because it suggests that sustainable mobility at the destination cannot be planned independently from tourists' wider travel patterns. If visitors arrive with their own cars, they may continue to depend on them throughout their stay. Therefore, policies that promote public transport should consider not only local routes, but also information, incentives, parking management, intermodal connections, and the convenience of using alternatives once tourists are already in the destination.

The quality of public transport services is also directly linked to visitor satisfaction. Le-Klähn, Hall, and Gerike (2014), in their study of visitor satisfaction with public transport in Munich, identify travelling comfort, service quality, accessibility, and additional features as important dimensions influencing visitors' satisfaction. This indicates that public transport for tourism should not be evaluated only by its existence, but also by its usability, reliability, comfort, clarity, and integration with tourist needs. For visitors who are unfamiliar with the destination, clear information, readable routes, simple ticketing, and connections to attractions can be as important as the physical availability of transport itself.

Cycling represents another important form of sustainable mobility in tourism destinations. It can serve both as a transport mode and as a tourism experience in itself. Gazzola et al. (2018) describe cycle tourism as a concrete expression of sustainable tourism because it enables visitors to discover territories with relatively low consumption of natural resources and a stronger connection with the landscape. Cycling can be particularly valuable for destinations with short or medium distances between attractions, scenic routes, natural landscapes, and cultural points of interest. It may also support the diversification of tourism flows by encouraging visitors to explore areas beyond the most visited urban or coastal zones.

In urban and peri-urban destinations, shared bicycles and cycling infrastructure can further enhance the visitor experience. Chen and Huang (2020) found that the use of shared bikes by tourists can positively influence emotional experience, satisfaction, and destination loyalty. Their study suggests that cycling is not only a functional mobility option, but also a form of experiential consumption that can make the visit more enjoyable and memorable. This is especially relevant for destinations where cycling is part of the local identity or where the physical structure of the city allows safe and pleasant cycling.

Walkability is equally important, particularly in urban tourism areas. Walking is often the most direct way for visitors to experience a city, observe its everyday life, access cultural attractions, interact with public spaces, and develop a sense of place. Hall and Ram (2019) emphasize that walking is an important part of the tourist experience and a significant element of sustainable mobility. However, they also argue that walkability should be assessed from a tourism-specific perspective, since visitors may have different needs from residents. Tourists often require clear pedestrian routes, safe crossings, attractive public spaces, signage, access to attractions, and information that helps them navigate unfamiliar environments.

The integration of public transport, cycling, and walking is especially important. These modes should not be treated as separate systems, but as complementary parts of a wider mobility network. Public transport can connect longer distances, cycling can support flexible movement between nearby attractions, and walking can strengthen the direct experience of urban and cultural spaces. When these forms of mobility are well integrated, they can reduce the pressure created by private vehicles and allow tourists to experience the destination in a more sustainable and diversified way.

For the Shkodra region, this integrated perspective is particularly relevant. The city of Shkodra has an urban structure and cycling tradition that can support active mobility, while the wider region includes lake, coastal, mountain, river, and cultural attractions that require better connectivity. Sustainable mobility planning should therefore consider both the internal movement within the city and the links between the city and surrounding tourism areas such as Shirokë, Zogaj, Velipojë, Lake Vau i Dejës, and the Buna River corridor. In this sense, public transport, cycling, and walkability are not only mobility solutions; they are instruments for improving visitor experience, reducing environmental pressure, and supporting more balanced regional tourism development.

2.3 Mobility, Visitor Experience, and Quality of Life

Mobility has a direct influence on the way tourists experience a destination. It affects not only how visitors move from one place to another, but also how they perceive accessibility, comfort, safety, time efficiency, and the overall attractiveness of the destination. In tourism destinations, mobility is therefore both a functional requirement and an experiential element. When movement is easy, clear, and comfortable, tourists are more likely to explore different areas, combine multiple attractions, and develop a more positive evaluation of the destination.

Visitor experience is strongly shaped by the ability of tourists to understand and navigate the destination. Edwards and Griffin (2013), using GPS tracking in Sydney and Melbourne, show that tourists' spatial behaviour within cities is complex and that lack of knowledge about public transport systems and ticketing can be a major constraint on public transport use. Their study also highlights the value of wayfinding systems, visitor information, and destination management tools in improving the visitor experience. This suggests that sustainable mobility is not only about infrastructure, but also about information, orientation, and the ease with which visitors can make mobility decisions.

In this context, mobility planning should consider the specific needs of tourists as temporary users of the destination. Unlike residents, tourists may not be familiar with routes, ticketing systems, service frequencies, distances, or the relationship between different attractions. For this reason, clear signage, simple transport information, integrated maps, digital tools, and visible

connections between transport stops and attractions can significantly improve the quality of the visit. A destination that is easy to understand and move through is likely to be perceived as more welcoming, accessible, and professionally managed.

The availability of sustainable mobility options can also influence tourists' environmental behaviour. Miller, Merrilees, and Coghlan (2015), in their study of sustainable urban tourism, found that available facilities are an important factor in supporting visitors' pro-environmental behaviour, including green transport use. This means that tourists are more likely to behave sustainably when the destination provides practical, visible, and easy-to-use alternatives. Sustainable behaviour should not depend only on visitors' environmental attitudes; it also depends on whether the destination makes sustainable choices convenient and attractive.

Mobility is also closely connected to quality of life for local communities. Tourism growth can bring economic opportunities, but it can also increase traffic, congestion, parking pressure, noise, pressure on public spaces, and environmental stress. When mobility systems depend mainly on private vehicles, both residents and visitors may experience reduced comfort and efficiency. For residents, this can affect everyday movement, access to services, urban livability, and perceptions of tourism. For visitors, the same problems can reduce satisfaction and weaken the image of the destination.

Sustainable mobility can reduce these tensions by supporting a better balance between tourism activity and local life. Public transport, cycling, and walking can lower the pressure on roads and parking areas, improve access to public spaces, and make urban environments more pleasant. In destinations where tourism takes place close to residential areas, this balance is especially important. A mobility system that serves both residents and visitors can contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable form of destination development.

The link between mobility and quality of life is also relevant at the regional level. If mobility connections are weak, tourism may concentrate in a few highly visited areas, increasing pressure on those spaces while leaving other attractions underused. Better mobility can help distribute visitors more evenly across the destination, allowing them to access secondary attractions, emerging tourism areas, and surrounding communities. This can support local economic benefits beyond the main urban center and reduce the concentration of tourism impacts.

For the Shkodra region, this relationship is particularly important. The city of Shkodra functions as both an attraction and a hub for wider regional tourism movement. Improving mobility within the city and between the city and surrounding destinations can enhance the visitor experience while also improving everyday mobility for residents. Better public transport connections, safer cycling routes, walkable urban spaces, and clearer visitor information can support both tourism development and community well-being.

In this sense, mobility should be viewed as part of the destination experience and not only as a transport service. A well-designed mobility system can improve tourist satisfaction, encourage longer and more diversified visits, reduce negative environmental impacts, and strengthen the relationship between tourism development and local quality of life. For growing destinations such as Shkodra, this integrated understanding of mobility is essential for ensuring that tourism growth remains beneficial, accessible, and sustainable.

3. Study Area and Methodology

3.1 The Shkodra Region as a Tourism Destination

The Shkodra region represents one of the most diverse tourism areas in northern Albania, combining urban, cultural, natural, lake, river, mountain, and coastal tourism resources. Its geographical position, historical identity, and proximity to important natural landscapes give the region a strategic role in the development of tourism in Albania. The city of Shkodra is one of the country's oldest urban centers and functions not only as a cultural and historical attraction, but also as a key point of orientation for wider regional tourism movement.

The tourism offer of the region is highly diversified. Theth National Park is among the most recognized mountain tourism destinations in northern Albania, attracting visitors interested in nature, hiking, rural landscapes, and authentic local experiences. Velipojë, on the other hand, represents an important coastal tourism area, especially during the summer season. In addition to these established destinations, areas such as Shirokë, Zogaj, Lake Vau i Dejës, and the Buna River corridor are increasingly relevant for the diversification of the regional tourism product.

The city of Shkodra plays a central role within this wider destination system. It is not only a transit point for visitors travelling toward the Alps, the coast, or lake areas, but also a destination in itself. Its cultural heritage, historical sites, museums, urban identity, local gastronomy, public spaces, and cycling culture contribute to its attractiveness. At the same time, the city serves as a hub from which tourists can access surrounding attractions and combine different types of experiences within the same trip.

This combination of urban and regional tourism resources creates important opportunities for destination development. Visitors can potentially experience cultural tourism in the city, lake-based recreation in Shirokë and Zogaj, coastal tourism in Velipojë, mountain tourism in Theth, and nature-based or river-related experiences along the Buna and Drin systems. Such diversity can increase the attractiveness of the Shkodra destination and support longer stays, repeat visits, and a more balanced distribution of tourism benefits across the region.

However, this spatial diversity also creates important mobility challenges. The attractiveness of the destination depends not only on the existence of tourism resources, but also on the ability of visitors and residents to move between them in an efficient, safe, accessible, and sustainable way. As tourism activity expands beyond the urban center, mobility becomes a key factor in connecting different parts of the destination and in shaping the overall visitor experience.

For this reason, the Shkodra region provides a relevant case for examining the relationship between sustainable mobility and tourism development. Its tourism potential is not concentrated in a single location, but distributed across a network of urban, natural, cultural, lake, coastal, and mountain areas. This makes mobility planning particularly important for the future competitiveness and sustainability of the destination.

3.2 Mobility and Tourism Context in the Region

The relationship between mobility and tourism in the Shkodra region is becoming increasingly important as tourism activity expands both within the city and across surrounding destinations. The spatial structure of the region creates a tourism system based on movement between different types of attractions rather than on a single concentrated tourism area. Visitors may combine the city of Shkodra with lake areas, coastal destinations, mountain landscapes, rural communities, cultural sites, and emerging recreational spaces. This makes mobility a central condition for the effective functioning of the destination.

At present, movement within the region remains strongly dependent on private vehicles, informal transport arrangements, taxis, organized tours, and seasonal travel patterns. While these forms of mobility provide flexibility, they may also contribute to congestion, parking pressure, uneven accessibility, and environmental stress, especially during weekends, holidays, and the summer season. In areas where public transport connections are limited or not clearly adapted to tourism needs, visitors may find it difficult to access attractions without using private cars or private transport services.

The city of Shkodra has a particular mobility identity because of its relatively strong cycling tradition compared to many other Albanian cities. Cycling is part of the everyday urban culture and can represent an important advantage for sustainable tourism development. However, the existence of a cycling tradition does not automatically mean that the city and the wider region are fully prepared for cycling-based tourism mobility. Safe cycling routes, continuity of infrastructure, connections with tourism attractions, signage, bike parking, rental services, and integration with public transport are all important elements that need to be considered if cycling is to become a stronger component of the visitor experience.

Walkability is also important within the city, especially because many urban attractions, cultural sites, public spaces, hospitality services, and everyday local experiences are located within relatively accessible distances. A walkable urban environment can strengthen the tourist experience by allowing visitors to explore the city more slowly and directly. However, the quality of walking depends on pedestrian safety, public space design, traffic conditions, signage, shading, street maintenance, and the overall comfort of movement. Increased vehicle traffic may reduce the attractiveness of walking, particularly in central areas or near highly visited places.

The connection between the city and surrounding tourism areas represents another important mobility issue. Destinations such as Shirokë and Zogaj are closely linked to the identity of Lake Shkodra and can be accessed within a relatively short distance from the city. Velipojë represents an important coastal destination, while Theth is a major mountain tourism attraction. Lake Vau i Dejës and the Buna River corridor also have potential for further tourism development. However, the ability to connect these areas through sustainable and visitor-friendly mobility options remains a key challenge.

In this context, mobility should not be understood only as a matter of road infrastructure. Road improvements are important, but sustainable tourism development also requires attention to public transport, cycling routes, pedestrian environments, multimodal connections, visitor information, and the coordination of mobility with tourism planning. If different attractions are not well connected, the region may face fragmented tourism development, where some areas receive high pressure while others remain underused despite having tourism potential.

The mobility context of Shkodra therefore presents both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, increasing tourism flows can intensify car dependency, congestion, noise, pressure on public spaces, and environmental concerns. On the other hand, the region has favorable conditions for developing more sustainable mobility solutions, especially because of the city's cycling culture, the presence of nearby lake destinations, the diversity of tourism resources, and the possibility of linking urban, natural, and recreational experiences more effectively.

For these reasons, mobility planning should be considered an essential part of destination development in the Shkodra region. Improved public transport, safer cycling infrastructure, better pedestrian conditions, and clearer tourism mobility information can contribute to a more positive visitor experience and to better quality of life for residents. A more integrated mobility approach can also support the spatial diversification of tourism, helping visitors access a wider range of destinations while reducing pressure on the most congested areas.

3.3 Research Methodology

This paper adopts a mixed methodological approach that combines academic literature review, systematic field observation, informal resident inquiry, and contextual analysis to examine the role of sustainable mobility in supporting tourism development in the Shkodra region.

The first element of the methodology is a review of existing academic literature on sustainable tourism, sustainable mobility, public transport, cycling, walkability, visitor experience, and destination management. This literature provides the theoretical basis for understanding why mobility is an important component of tourism development and how different mobility forms can influence both tourists and local communities.

The second element is systematic field observation conducted by the authors over a period of approximately six months, with visits carried out at approximately two-week intervals. Observation sites were selected based on the official public transport stops designated by the Municipality of Shkodra, covering the urban network as well as connections toward lake areas and peripheral zones. During these visits, attention was given to service frequency, departure regularity, timetable reliability, infrastructure conditions, passenger presence, and the practical usability of transport services at different times of day. Informal conversations were also conducted with residents who regularly use public transport in the observed areas, providing additional insight into service patterns, departure unpredictability, evening service availability, and everyday accessibility challenges. These direct observations and resident inputs informed the contextual assessment presented in Section 4, particularly regarding public transport coverage, the gap between formal service availability and real usability, and the specific challenges affecting lake, peripheral, and rural connections.

The third element is contextual analysis of the Shkodra region as a tourism destination. This includes the consideration of the city of Shkodra as an urban and cultural attraction, as well as its role as a hub connecting surrounding destinations such as Shirokë, Zogaj, Velipojë, Theth, Lake Vau i Dejës, and the Buna River corridor. The analysis focuses on the spatial distribution of tourism resources and the mobility implications that arise from this diversified destination structure.

The fourth element is document and source analysis. Official documents, institutional notices, and policy developments relevant to mobility and tourism were identified through systematic monitoring of official websites and media reporting on transport and tourism policy in Albania. This includes, in particular, the official notice published by the Albanian Tax Administration regarding the requirement for POS terminals in public transport vehicles and taxis, which represents a relevant policy development with direct implications for tourism accessibility.

The study applies interpretive analysis to connect these elements and identify key mobility-related challenges and opportunities. Particular attention is given to public transport reliability, cycling infrastructure, walkability, private vehicle dependence, accessibility, visitor information, digital address systems, and the integration of mobility with tourism planning. These dimensions are examined in relation to their potential effects on tourist satisfaction, destination accessibility, environmental pressure, and the quality of life of local residents.

The study is exploratory and context-specific in nature. It seeks to develop a structured understanding of the issue and to identify strategic directions for future planning. The field observation component provides empirical grounding for the contextual analysis, while the literature review and document analysis offer broader theoretical and policy context. The paper acknowledges that the findings reflect the specific conditions of the Shkodra region during the observation period and that more extensive quantitative research, including visitor surveys, transport accessibility mapping, traffic counts, and seasonal mobility tracking, would further strengthen the evidence base for future planning decisions.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Tourism Growth and Mobility Demand

Tourism growth in the Shkodra region has increased the importance of mobility as a strategic component of destination development. As tourism activity expands and becomes more spatially diversified, the demand for movement between different attractions, accommodation areas, public spaces, and surrounding destinations also increases. Mobility is therefore no longer only a general urban or transport issue, but a key factor influencing how tourism functions within the region.

The Shkodra destination is characterized by a combination of urban, natural, cultural, lake, coastal, river, and mountain tourism resources. This diversity creates opportunities for visitors to combine different experiences within the same trip, such as exploring the city of Shkodra, visiting lake areas such as Shirokë and Zogaj, travelling to Velipojë, accessing mountain destinations such as Theth, or discovering emerging areas such as Lake Vau i Dejës and the Buna River corridor. However, the possibility of combining these experiences depends strongly on the availability, quality, clarity, and reliability of mobility options.

As discussed in the literature, tourist movement within destinations is shaped not only by the existence of attractions, but also by the way tourists understand and use mobility systems. Edwards and Griffin (2013) show that tourists' spatial behaviour in cities can be complex and that lack of knowledge about public transport systems and ticketing may limit public transport use. This is relevant for Shkodra because many visitors may be unfamiliar with local routes, transport schedules, distances, or the practical connections between the city and surrounding destinations.

The increase in tourism demand also creates pressure on existing mobility infrastructure. When mobility alternatives are limited, unclear, or unreliable, tourists are more likely to depend on private cars, taxis, organized tours, or informal transport arrangements. This can intensify congestion, parking demand, and pressure on central urban areas and highly visited tourism sites. Gutiérrez and Miravet (2016) show that tourists arriving by private car are less likely to use public transport during their stay, which suggests that car-based arrival patterns may reinforce car dependency within the destination itself.

In the Shkodra region, this issue is particularly important because several tourism areas are located outside the city center and require movement across different spatial scales. Some attractions are close to the city and could potentially be accessed through cycling, walking, or short public transport connections, while others require more organized regional mobility. As a result, tourism growth increases not only the total volume of movement, but also the need for different mobility solutions adapted to different types of destinations and visitor needs.

Tourism growth therefore produces a dual mobility challenge. On the one hand, the region needs to manage the negative effects of increased movement, such as congestion, noise, parking pressure, road safety concerns, and environmental stress. On the other hand, it needs to improve accessibility so that visitors can reach a wider range of attractions in a convenient and sustainable way. This requires an integrated approach that connects tourism planning with public transport, cycling infrastructure, pedestrian conditions, visitor information, and regional accessibility.

From this perspective, mobility demand should not be interpreted simply as a need for more road capacity. While road infrastructure remains important, sustainable tourism development requires a broader understanding of mobility. Public transport, cycling, walking, intermodal connections, and clear visitor information can help manage tourism growth more effectively. They can also improve the visitor experience and support local quality of life by reducing excessive dependence on private vehicles.

For the Shkodra region, the main issue is not only the growth of tourism itself, but the ability of the destination to organize this growth spatially and sustainably. If mobility systems improve, tourists may be encouraged to explore more areas, stay longer, and distribute their spending more widely. If mobility remains fragmented, however, tourism growth may create stronger pressure on a limited number of routes, spaces, and attractions. Therefore, managing mobility demand is essential for transforming tourism growth into balanced and sustainable destination development.

4.2 Current Mobility Conditions and Challenges

The current mobility conditions in the Shkodra region reveal several challenges that affect both tourism development and community quality of life. Field observation conducted over approximately six months, combined with informal conversations with residents who regularly use public transport, provides a basis for assessing the practical functioning of the mobility system beyond its formal structure.

Recent infrastructure interventions indicate that mobility challenges in Shkodra are receiving increasing attention. One relevant example is the widening of the road from the Harku i Bërdicës area toward the bridge over the Drin River near Rozafa Castle, together with the construction of a new bridge in this location. The doubling of road width in this segment may improve traffic flow at one of the important entry points to the city and reduce pressure on a critical connection between regional and urban movement. However, these interventions should be understood as part of a wider mobility system rather than as a complete solution. Road infrastructure improvements need to be accompanied by broader mobility planning, including public transport reliability, cycling continuity, pedestrian safety, parking management, and better connections between tourism areas.

It is also important to distinguish between different levels of public transport service across the region. Intercity connections, particularly the Shkodra–Tirana line, appear to function with relatively higher frequency and regularity, supported by stronger and more stable passenger demand. This suggests that timetable reliability is more achievable where demand is consistent and routes are commercially viable. However, the situation differs considerably for urban, rural, peripheral, and tourism-related local routes, where lower or more seasonal demand creates different operational conditions.

Field observation and resident input reveal that the public transport network within the city of Shkodra is served by a single urban line. This line connects physically with the terminals of three regionally significant routes — the Tirana intercity line, the Velipojë line, and the Shirokë–Zogaj line — stopping directly at their respective terminal points and enabling passenger transfers without requiring significant additional walking. This represents a functional integration between the urban line and these three destinations. However, the terminals serving other important tourism and regional destinations, including Theth, the wider Dukagjini area, Malësia e Madhe, Lake Vau i Dejës, and similar mountain and rural routes, are not connected to the urban line either through shared stops or through intersecting routes along the network. Passengers wishing to access these destinations using public transport must therefore reach their departure points independently, without the support of an integrated interchange system. This structural disconnect limits the practical role of public transport as a unified mobility network for a significant portion of the regional destination system and increases dependence on walking, cycling, private cars, or taxis for completing these journeys.

The situation becomes more complex when considering connections with tourism-relevant destinations around the city. Field observation identified three distinct operational patterns among the routes examined, each presenting different implications for tourism accessibility.

The Shirokë–Zogaj line operates on a fixed timetable with two departures per day, one in the morning and one at midday. Unlike other routes in the region, the number of passengers present does not influence departure times on this line. While this fixed schedule provides a degree of predictability, two daily departures represent a very limited service for a lake destination with strong tourism potential located relatively close to the city. Evening service is absent, which means that visitors wishing to combine a city visit with an afternoon or evening experience by the lake cannot do so using public transport. This significantly limits the accessibility of one of the most attractive nearby tourism areas for visitors without private vehicles.

The Velipojë route shows a more responsive but still variable pattern. Outside the tourism season, services operate approximately every one to two hours. During the summer season, frequency increases and departures can occur more often during peak hours. However, in less frequented time slots even during the season, frequency tends to vary. While Velipojë benefits from comparatively stronger demand, service reliability during off-peak hours and outside the high season remains inconsistent. For a coastal destination that plays an important role in the regional tourism system, this variability can create uncertainty for visitors planning travel without private cars.

Mountain and rural connections present the most constrained pattern. Field observation of the Theth route shows that departures from Shkodra are concentrated in the morning, with several services leaving within a relatively short interval. Return services follow a similar pattern, concentrated around midday. This schedule reflects the operational logic of aligning with passenger demand peaks, but it creates significant limitations for tourism use. Visitors wishing to make flexible day trips, arrive later in the morning, or return in the afternoon or evening have limited or no public transport options. Furthermore, observation indicated that on routes outside the Shirokë–Zogaj line, departures are influenced by the number of passengers present in the vehicle rather than following a fixed schedule. This practice is understandable from the economic perspective of operators, particularly in the absence of subsidies that would compensate for operating low-demand routes at a loss. However, from a tourism and accessibility perspective, departure uncertainty makes public transport unreliable and unattractive for visitors who need predictable schedules.

This distinction between the formal existence of a route and its real usability is one of the central findings of the field observation. A route may be considered available in administrative terms, but if departures are rare, concentrated within narrow time windows, or dependent on passenger numbers, it does not function as a dependable mobility option. For tourists, this uncertainty is a significant barrier, because visitors need clear schedules, predictable return options, and confidence that they can reach and leave a destination without difficulty.

Another relevant aspect of mobility and accessibility is wayfinding and address identification. Physical road signage in and around Shkodra is generally in acceptable condition and provides basic orientation for drivers and visitors. However, a more significant challenge appears in the digital identification of addresses and locations. In many cases, buildings, businesses, accommodation units, and service points are not easily identifiable through a complete and standardized address system based on street names and building numbers that can be reliably found on digital maps. As a result, orientation often depends on shared digital locations, social media business pages, informal directions, or location links sent through messaging applications. For tourists, especially international visitors unfamiliar with the city, the absence of accurate searchable addresses can create uncertainty, reduce ease of movement, and make it more difficult to find accommodation, attractions, restaurants, transport points, or local services independently.

A further relevant policy development is the official requirement that public transport vehicles and taxis be equipped with POS terminals for card payments by 31 May 2026, as announced by the Albanian Tax Administration. This measure is intended to facilitate access to transport services, including for tourists, by enabling electronic payments. However, field observation confirmed that POS terminals had not yet been visibly installed on the observed vehicles during the observation period. Moreover, reporting on the Tirana intercity bus lines indicates that operators have applied higher fares for card payments, citing the approximately three percent banking commission retained on card transactions as an additional cost that affects their operating margins. If the same dynamic applies to lines serving the Shkodra region, as would be reasonable to expect given that operators face identical commission structures, payment modernization may be accompanied by fare differentiation that could reduce its practical benefit for passengers and tourists. This suggests that digital payment improvement, while a positive step, requires careful policy design to ensure that it genuinely improves accessibility rather than simply transferring additional costs to users.

These challenges are not only technical but also economic and institutional. Low demand on some routes makes regular service financially difficult for private operators, especially when there is no public subsidy or service obligation requiring fixed-schedule departures. The absence of urban network connections for mountain and rural terminals, the concentration of departures within narrow morning and midday windows for mountain destinations, the very limited frequency on the Shirokë–Zogaj line, and the passenger-dependent departure practice on several routes all reflect systemic conditions that require policy responses beyond individual infrastructure investments.

The literature supports the importance of this issue. Gutiérrez and Miravet (2016) show that tourists who arrive by private car are less likely to use public transport during their stay, which means that weak or unreliable local transport can reinforce car dependency. Similarly, Le-Klähn and Hall (2015) emphasize that public transport use by tourists depends not only on the existence of services, but also on visitor-oriented provision, communication, and destination management. In the Shkodra context, this suggests

that public transport must be planned not simply as a resident service, but also as part of the tourism experience and accessibility system.

Overall, the main challenge is that mobility in the Shkodra region does not yet function as a fully reliable and integrated system for tourism purposes. Limited urban public transport coverage, the structural disconnection between the urban line and the terminals of mountain and rural routes, low frequency on lake connections, narrow departure windows for mountain destinations, departure uncertainty on demand-dependent routes, absent evening services, and incomplete digital address identification reduce the attractiveness and usability of sustainable mobility options for both residents and visitors. At the same time, ongoing road improvements, cycling infrastructure developments, generally acceptable physical signage, and the planned introduction of card payment systems show that mobility is becoming a more visible policy concern. The key challenge is to ensure that these interventions are not fragmented but are integrated into a broader sustainable mobility strategy that supports accessibility, visitor experience, environmental quality, and balanced regional tourism development.

4.3 Sustainable Mobility and Visitor Experience

Sustainable mobility has a direct influence on the visitor experience because it affects how easily, comfortably, and confidently tourists can move within a destination. In the Shkodra region, where tourism resources are distributed across urban, lake, coastal, mountain, river, and rural areas, the quality of mobility can determine whether visitors experience the destination as accessible and integrated or as fragmented and difficult to navigate.

A positive visitor experience depends not only on the attractiveness of tourism resources, but also on the practical ability to reach them. Tourists may be interested in combining different experiences, such as visiting the city of Shkodra, exploring Rozafa Castle, travelling to Shirokë or Zogaj, spending time in Velipojë, or accessing mountain and rural destinations. However, if mobility options are unclear, infrequent, or unreliable, visitors may reduce the number of places they visit, rely more heavily on private transport, or avoid certain areas altogether.

Public transport can improve the visitor experience when it is reliable, easy to understand, and connected to tourism needs. For tourists, the existence of a route is not sufficient if schedules are unclear, departures are uncertain, or return options are limited. Visitors usually need predictable services, simple information, visible stops, understandable routes, and confidence that they can return from a destination at a reasonable time. In this sense, public transport reliability becomes part of the quality of the tourism product itself.

The literature supports this connection between transport quality and visitor satisfaction. Le-Klähn, Hall, and Gerike (2014) identify travelling comfort, service quality, accessibility, and additional features as important dimensions influencing visitor satisfaction with public transport. This suggests that mobility services should be evaluated not only from an operational perspective, but also from the perspective of the tourist as a temporary and often unfamiliar user of the destination.

Cycling also has strong potential to enhance the visitor experience in Shkodra. The city has a recognized cycling tradition, relatively manageable urban distances, and proximity to attractive lake and cultural areas. For visitors, cycling can function both as a means of transport and as an experience in itself. It allows slower movement, closer contact with the urban environment, greater flexibility, and a more direct relationship with local life and landscape. If cycling routes are safe, continuous, and well connected to attractions, they can strengthen Shkodra's image as a sustainable and visitor-friendly destination.

Walking is equally important, especially within the city and in areas of cultural and urban interest. Walkability allows tourists to experience public spaces, local architecture, hospitality services, markets, museums, and everyday urban life more directly. Hall and Ram (2019) emphasize that walking is a central part of the tourist experience and an important element of sustainable mobility. In the Shkodra context, improving pedestrian comfort, safety, shading, crossings, signage, and links between attractions can contribute significantly to the quality of the visit.

Visitor experience is also shaped by information and orientation. Even when physical infrastructure exists, tourists may face difficulties if they cannot understand how to use it. Clear maps, digital information, visible transport stops, integrated tourism routes, accurate addresses, and reliable location data can reduce uncertainty and encourage independent movement. This is particularly important for international visitors who may not know local language, transport practices, informal landmarks, or the spatial structure of the city and region.

The current reliance on shared locations, social media pages, and informal directions can help visitors in some cases, but it does not fully replace a standardized and searchable address system. For tourists, accurate digital navigation is part of the mobility experience. If accommodation units, restaurants, attractions, transport points, and services cannot be easily found on digital maps through formal addresses, the destination may appear less organized and less accessible. Therefore, information infrastructure should be considered an essential part of sustainable mobility.

Payment systems can also affect the visitor experience. The requirement for public transport vehicles and taxis to be equipped with POS terminals for card payments by 31 May 2026 represents a positive step toward improving convenience and accessibility. For international tourists, the possibility of paying by card can reduce dependence on local cash and make transport services easier

to use. However, this improvement will have stronger value if it is combined with reliable service frequency, clear routes, transparent fares, and visitor-oriented information.

Sustainable mobility can also support a more diversified visitor experience. When mobility connections are improved, tourists are more likely to explore areas beyond the most obvious attractions. This can encourage visits to lake areas, surrounding villages, cultural sites, recreational spaces, and emerging tourism zones. In this way, mobility does not simply move tourists from one point to another; it expands the practical geography of the destination and allows visitors to experience it more fully.

For Shkodra, this is especially relevant because the destination's strength lies in the combination of multiple tourism resources rather than in a single attraction. Improved mobility can help transform this diversity into a coherent visitor experience. Public transport can provide structured access to key destinations, cycling can support flexible short-distance movement, walking can enhance urban exploration, and digital information can help visitors connect these elements independently.

Overall, sustainable mobility can improve visitor experience in the Shkodra region by increasing accessibility, reducing uncertainty, supporting independent movement, and enabling more diversified tourism itineraries. However, this requires mobility to be planned as part of destination management rather than as a separate transport function. A visitor-friendly mobility system should be reliable, legible, safe, comfortable, digitally supported, and connected to the main tourism areas of the region.

4.4 Sustainable Mobility and Community Quality of Life

Sustainable mobility is important not only for tourists, but also for local communities. In tourism destinations, mobility systems are shared by residents, visitors, businesses, workers, and service providers. When tourism grows, the demand for movement increases and the pressure on roads, parking spaces, public areas, and transport services becomes more visible. Therefore, the quality of mobility directly affects the quality of life of residents as well as the quality of the visitor experience.

In the Shkodra region, this relationship is particularly relevant because tourism activity is not limited to one isolated area. It takes place in the city, near the lake, along coastal areas, in mountain destinations, and in surrounding rural spaces. As a result, mobility pressures may appear in different forms: congestion at city entry points, parking difficulties near attractions, increased traffic in central areas, seasonal pressure toward Velipojë, and limited accessibility for communities located outside the main urban core.

A mobility system that depends heavily on private vehicles can create several negative effects for residents. These include traffic congestion, noise, reduced pedestrian comfort, pressure on parking spaces, road safety concerns, and possible deterioration of air quality. In central and highly frequented areas, excessive car use may reduce the attractiveness of public spaces and make everyday movement more difficult. This can create tension between tourism development and local quality of life, especially when residents perceive tourism as increasing pressure on the city without improving daily services.

Public transport, cycling, and walking can help reduce these pressures if they are developed as reliable and attractive alternatives. Improved public transport can serve both residents and visitors, especially if routes and schedules are designed to connect residential areas, employment zones, schools, public services, tourism attractions, and surrounding settlements. In this way, public transport should not be viewed only as a social service for residents or only as a convenience for tourists, but as a shared public good that supports the functioning of the destination as a whole.

Cycling also has an important quality-of-life dimension in Shkodra. The city's cycling tradition is a valuable local asset because it already reflects a form of everyday sustainable mobility. Strengthening cycling infrastructure can improve safety, reduce conflict with motorized traffic, and encourage both residents and visitors to use bicycles more confidently. This can contribute to a healthier urban environment, lower transport costs, and a stronger identity for Shkodra as a city where cycling is part of everyday life and tourism experience.

Walkability has similar importance for community well-being. Comfortable pedestrian spaces, safe crossings, accessible sidewalks, shaded routes, and attractive public areas make the city more livable for residents and more enjoyable for visitors. In tourism destinations, the same improvements that help tourists move around more easily also benefit local people in their daily routines. Therefore, investments in walkability should be understood as both tourism infrastructure and community infrastructure.

The improvement of mobility in rural, peripheral, and mountain areas is also important for social inclusion. When public transport is limited or irregular, residents without access to private vehicles may face difficulties reaching services, employment opportunities, education, healthcare, and administrative functions. In tourism areas, weak mobility can also limit the ability of local communities to benefit from tourism development. Better connections can help surrounding communities participate more actively in the tourism economy by improving access for visitors, workers, and local suppliers.

At the same time, mobility planning should avoid transferring tourism pressure from one area to another without adequate management. Improving access to lake, coastal, rural, or mountain destinations can increase visitor flows, but these flows need to be managed carefully. Sustainable mobility should therefore be accompanied by parking regulation, visitor information, environmental protection measures, pedestrian safety, and coordination with local communities. Otherwise, better access may increase pressure on fragile areas instead of supporting balanced development.

The relationship between mobility and quality of life also has an institutional dimension. Many mobility problems cannot be solved only through individual infrastructure projects. They require coordination between transport planning, tourism development, urban planning, environmental management, fiscal policy, and local economic development. For example, reliable public transport in low-demand areas may require subsidies or public service obligations, while tourism-oriented routes may require seasonal planning and cooperation between municipalities, operators, tourism businesses, and local communities.

From a community perspective, the goal of sustainable mobility is not simply to move more tourists, but to organize movement in a way that improves the destination for both visitors and residents. If tourism mobility is planned only around visitor demand, it may overlook the needs of local communities. If it is planned only as a resident service, it may fail to support the tourism economy. A balanced approach should recognize that residents and visitors often use the same streets, transport services, public spaces, and information systems.

For the Shkodra region, sustainable mobility can therefore contribute to quality of life by reducing car dependency, improving accessibility, supporting safer and healthier movement, and distributing tourism benefits more evenly. It can also strengthen the relationship between the city and surrounding areas, allowing tourism development to extend beyond the most visited locations while reducing pressure on congested points. In this sense, mobility is not only a technical issue, but a key condition for inclusive and sustainable destination development.

Overall, improving sustainable mobility in Shkodra can generate benefits that go beyond tourism. It can support everyday access for residents, improve urban livability, reduce environmental pressure, strengthen local identity, and create a more balanced relationship between tourism growth and community well-being. For this reason, community quality of life should be placed at the center of mobility and tourism planning, rather than treated as a secondary effect of infrastructure development.

4.5 Opportunities for Integrated and Sustainable Regional Development

The mobility challenges identified in the Shkodra region also create important opportunities for more integrated and sustainable regional development. The destination has a diverse tourism structure, including the city of Shkodra, lake areas, coastal destinations, mountain attractions, rural communities, cultural sites, and river-related spaces. This diversity can become a strong competitive advantage if mobility systems are planned in a way that connects these areas more effectively and allows visitors to experience the region as an integrated destination.

One of the main opportunities is to strengthen the role of the city of Shkodra as a regional tourism hub. The city already functions as an important point of arrival, orientation, accommodation, services, and cultural experience. From Shkodra, visitors can potentially access nearby lake destinations such as Shirokë and Zogaj, coastal tourism in Velipojë, mountain tourism in Theth, and emerging attractions such as Lake Vau i Dejës and the Buna River corridor. Better mobility connections would allow the city to operate not only as a transit point, but as the central organizing node of a wider tourism system.

Sustainable mobility can support the diversification of tourism flows. If visitors have reliable and clear transport options, they are more likely to explore areas beyond the most familiar or easily accessible attractions. This can reduce pressure on congested locations while creating opportunities for surrounding communities and lesser-known destinations. In this way, mobility can contribute to a more balanced distribution of tourism benefits across the region.

Public transport has an important role in this process. Seasonal or tourism-oriented routes could connect the city with lake, coastal, and recreational areas at specific times of the day and year. For example, more frequent and predictable connections with Shirokë and Zogaj could support lake-based tourism and evening leisure activities, while improved seasonal services to Velipojë could reduce dependence on private cars during the summer period. In mountain and rural areas, better coordination of transport schedules could support day trips, hiking, local gastronomy, and rural tourism experiences.

Cycling also offers strong potential for integrated tourism development. Shkodra's cycling tradition can be used as part of the destination identity, especially if cycling infrastructure is connected with tourism routes and nearby attractions. Safe and well-marked cycling routes could link the city with lake areas, cultural sites, recreational spaces, and surrounding villages. This would allow cycling to function not only as urban mobility, but also as a tourism product that supports slow, low-impact, and experience-based travel.

Walkability can further strengthen the urban tourism experience. A more walkable city center, better pedestrian links between attractions, improved public spaces, and clearer orientation systems can encourage visitors to spend more time in the city. Walking routes could connect cultural heritage sites, museums, hospitality areas, markets, public squares, and viewpoints. This would help transform urban movement into part of the tourism experience itself.

Another opportunity is the improvement of digital mobility and information systems. Accurate digital addresses, updated maps, visible transport stops, clear timetables, integrated tourism routes, and reliable online information can make the destination easier to understand and navigate. For international visitors, this type of information is essential because it reduces uncertainty and supports independent movement. In this sense, digital accessibility should be considered part of tourism infrastructure.

The requirement for POS terminals in public transport and taxis can also contribute to this broader process. Electronic payment systems may improve convenience for tourists and reduce practical barriers to using local transport. However, their full value

depends on integration with other improvements, such as service reliability, transparent fares, clear routes, and accessible information. Payment modernization should therefore be understood as one element within a wider visitor-oriented mobility system.

Integrated mobility planning can also support environmental sustainability. By improving alternatives to private vehicles, the destination can reduce congestion, emissions, noise, and pressure on public spaces. This is particularly important in sensitive natural areas, lake zones, mountain destinations, and coastal spaces where uncontrolled traffic and parking can affect both environmental quality and visitor experience. Sustainable mobility can therefore help protect the very resources on which the tourism attractiveness of the region depends.

The literature suggests that such transitions require more than isolated infrastructure projects. Scuttari, Volgger, and Pechlaner (2016) argue that sustainable mobility in tourism destinations requires governance, stakeholder coordination, and the management of complex interactions between tourism, transport, environmental, social, and political systems. This is highly relevant for Shkodra, where mobility improvements involve multiple actors, including local authorities, transport operators, tourism businesses, residents, visitors, and national institutions.

For integrated regional development, mobility planning should therefore be coordinated with tourism strategy, urban planning, environmental management, and local economic development. Routes, schedules, cycling paths, pedestrian areas, parking policies, digital information systems, and tourism promotion should be designed as connected elements rather than separate interventions. This would help ensure that investments in roads, cycling lanes, public transport, payment systems, and digital mapping contribute to a shared destination vision.

The Shkodra region has the potential to develop a model of tourism mobility that combines urban accessibility, lake and river experiences, coastal tourism, mountain access, cycling culture, and community-based tourism. To achieve this, the destination needs a mobility approach that is reliable, inclusive, environmentally responsible, and easy for visitors to understand. Such an approach would not only improve movement, but also strengthen the identity and competitiveness of the destination.

Overall, sustainable mobility can become a strategic instrument for integrated regional development in Shkodra. By connecting attractions, supporting diversified visitor itineraries, reducing car dependency, improving access for residents, and strengthening links between the city and surrounding areas, mobility can help transform tourism growth into broader territorial benefits. The key opportunity is to move from fragmented mobility interventions toward an integrated system that supports tourism competitiveness, community well-being, and environmental sustainability.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Improving Public Transport and Accessibility

Improving public transport and accessibility should be one of the main priorities for supporting sustainable tourism development in the Shkodra region. The analysis shows that tourism growth has increased the need for reliable, clear, and integrated mobility options, especially because the destination includes urban, lake, coastal, rural, mountain, and river-related tourism areas. Public transport should therefore be planned not only as a basic mobility service for residents, but also as an essential component of the visitor experience and destination management.

A first recommendation is to strengthen the reliability of public transport services, particularly on routes that connect the city of Shkodra with surrounding tourism areas. For tourists, reliability is often more important than the mere existence of a route. Visitors need to know when a bus or minibus departs, where it stops, how much it costs, and whether there will be a return service later in the day. Therefore, published timetables should be realistic, visible, and respected as much as possible.

Special attention should be given to routes with tourism relevance, such as connections with Shirokë, Zogaj, Velipojë, rural areas, and mountain destinations. In these cases, service planning should consider seasonal demand, weekend flows, afternoon and evening needs, and the possibility of day trips. For example, more regular connections with Shirokë and Zogaj during the day and evening could support lake-based tourism and reduce dependence on private cars. Similarly, predictable seasonal services to Velipojë could help manage summer traffic and improve access for visitors without private vehicles.

A second recommendation is to consider public support mechanisms for low-demand but strategically important routes. Some routes may not be commercially profitable throughout the day or throughout the year, especially in rural, peripheral, and mountain areas. However, they may still be important for social inclusion, tourism development, and balanced regional accessibility. In such cases, subsidies, public service obligations, or seasonal service contracts could be used to ensure that vehicles depart according to fixed schedules even when passenger numbers are low.

This does not mean that all routes should operate with high frequency at all times. Rather, the objective should be to guarantee a minimum level of reliable service on selected routes that are important for residents and visitors. A limited but dependable timetable may be more useful than a theoretically available service that operates irregularly or depends on whether enough passengers are present. Reliability would increase confidence among tourists and make public transport a more realistic alternative to private cars and taxis.

A third recommendation is to improve the coverage of urban public transport within the city of Shkodra. The current urban network is served by a single line that, while connecting with the terminals of the Tirana, Velipojë, and Shirokë–Zogaj routes, does not extend to all parts of the city. Expanding or reorganizing urban routes could improve access to residential areas, public services, accommodation zones, cultural attractions, and commercial areas. Better urban coverage would benefit residents directly and would also help tourists move more easily within the city.

Accessibility should also include better integration between different mobility modes. Public transport stops should be connected with pedestrian routes, cycling infrastructure, parking areas, taxi points, and key tourism attractions. This would allow visitors to combine different forms of mobility during the same trip. For example, a visitor could arrive by bus, walk through the city center, rent a bicycle for lake areas, or use a taxi for specific destinations. Such integration would make mobility more flexible and user-friendly.

Clear and accessible information is essential. Timetables, routes, fares, stops, and service conditions should be available in visible physical locations and through digital platforms. Information should be simple, updated, and understandable for both residents and international visitors. In tourism destinations, lack of information can be as limiting as lack of infrastructure. Therefore, maps, signs, online schedules, QR codes, and multilingual information should be considered part of the public transport system.

The modernization of payment systems can also support accessibility. The requirement for POS terminals in public transport vehicles and taxis by 31 May 2026 is a positive step that can make transport services easier to use for tourists. However, this measure should be accompanied by transparent fares, visible pricing information, and clear communication about available payment methods. If operators apply surcharges for card payments due to banking commission costs, as has been observed on some lines, this should be clearly communicated to passengers. Electronic payment improves convenience, but it should be integrated into a broader effort to make public transport more predictable and visitor-oriented.

Improving the digital address system should also be considered an accessibility priority. Tourists often depend on digital maps to find accommodation, restaurants, attractions, transport stops, and services. If addresses are incomplete or not searchable through street names and building numbers, visitors may become dependent on informal directions or shared location links. A more functional address system integrated with digital maps would improve navigation and reduce uncertainty for tourists and residents alike.

Finally, public transport and accessibility improvements should be coordinated with tourism planning. Routes and timetables should not be designed only according to administrative or operator logic, but also according to the spatial structure of tourism demand. This requires cooperation between local authorities, transport operators, tourism businesses, accommodation providers, community representatives, and national institutions. Such coordination would help ensure that public transport supports both daily mobility and tourism development.

Overall, improving public transport and accessibility in the Shkodra region requires a shift from fragmented services toward a more reliable, visible, and integrated mobility system. Better route coverage, timetable reliability, public support for strategic routes, digital information, card payment options, and improved address identification can make the destination easier to access and navigate. These measures would support visitor experience, reduce private vehicle dependence, and contribute to more balanced regional tourism development.

5.2 Expanding Sustainable Mobility Infrastructure

Expanding sustainable mobility infrastructure is essential for improving both tourism development and everyday quality of life in the Shkodra region. While public transport reliability is a key priority, sustainable mobility also depends on the physical, financial, and organizational conditions that allow walking, cycling, multimodal movement, and safer access to tourism areas. Infrastructure should therefore be planned not only to increase road capacity, but also to support cleaner, safer, and more inclusive forms of movement.

Cycling infrastructure should be one of the central components of this approach. Shkodra has a strong cycling tradition, which represents an important local advantage compared to many other destinations. However, this tradition needs to be supported by safe, continuous, and well-connected cycling infrastructure. Cycling lanes should not be developed only as isolated urban segments, but as part of a wider network that connects residential areas, cultural attractions, accommodation zones, public spaces, lake areas, and transport nodes.

Particular attention should be given to the connection between the city of Shkodra and nearby tourism areas such as Shirokë and Zogaj. These destinations are close enough to the city to have strong potential for cycling-based tourism and recreational mobility. Safe cycling routes, clear signage, resting points, bike parking, and possible bicycle rental services could make these areas more accessible without private vehicles. This would support lake-based tourism while reducing traffic and parking pressure along the lake corridor.

Cycling infrastructure should also be linked with the city's cultural and urban tourism offer. Routes connecting the city center, Rozafa Castle, museums, public squares, hospitality areas, and other attractions could help transform cycling into part of the visitor experience. For tourists, cycling can provide a slower and more direct way of experiencing the city and its surroundings. For residents, improved cycling infrastructure can increase safety and strengthen an existing sustainable mobility culture.

Pedestrian infrastructure is equally important. A walkable destination is easier to experience, more attractive, and more inclusive. In Shkodra, improvements in sidewalks, pedestrian crossings, lighting, shading, street furniture, and public space quality can support both residents and visitors. Walkable routes should connect important urban attractions, transport stops, accommodation areas, restaurants, markets, museums, and public spaces. This would encourage tourists to spend more time in the city and reduce dependence on short car or taxi trips.

The improvement of pedestrian links around key tourism sites is also important. Areas such as Rozafa Castle, the city center, lake access points, and transport terminals require safe and clear pedestrian connections. When walking routes are uncomfortable, unsafe, or unclear, visitors may avoid moving independently or may rely more on motorized transport. Therefore, pedestrian infrastructure should be considered part of the tourism product and not only a general urban improvement.

Road infrastructure improvements remain important, especially in entry points and critical corridors where congestion affects both residents and visitors. The widening of the road segment from Harku i Bërdicës toward the bridge over the Drin River near Rozafa Castle, together with the construction of a new bridge, can help improve traffic flow in an important access area. However, road expansion should not be the only response to mobility challenges. If not combined with public transport, cycling, walking, parking management, and traffic demand management, road improvements may simply move congestion from one point to another.

For this reason, infrastructure planning should follow a multimodal logic. Road improvements should be coordinated with bus stops, pedestrian crossings, cycling routes, parking areas, taxi points, and visitor information. This would help ensure that infrastructure investments support the whole mobility system rather than only private vehicle movement. In tourism destinations, multimodal infrastructure is especially important because visitors often combine different forms of movement during the same trip.

Parking management should also be included in sustainable mobility infrastructure planning. As tourism increases, parking pressure can become a major problem near attractions, public spaces, lake areas, beaches, and city centers. Uncontrolled parking can reduce pedestrian comfort, block cycling routes, create visual disorder, and increase congestion. Better parking organization, clear information, designated parking areas, and connections between parking spaces and walking or cycling routes can help reduce these pressures.

A further recommendation is to gradually discourage excessive dependence on private vehicles, especially in central urban areas, near key tourism attractions, and in environmentally sensitive locations. This should not be understood as a simple restriction of private car use, but as a balanced policy that makes sustainable alternatives more practical, attractive, and competitive. Measures such as better public transport, safer cycling routes, improved pedestrian spaces, organized parking, clear visitor information, and park-and-walk or park-and-ride solutions can reduce the need to use private vehicles for every movement within the destination.

A possible policy instrument for reducing excessive private vehicle dependence and improving public transport sustainability is the introduction or strengthening of paid parking schemes in central urban areas. Parking tariffs in the city center and near highly frequented tourism areas could serve two purposes. First, they could discourage unnecessary private car use in congested areas and encourage residents and visitors to consider alternative mobility options. Second, the revenues generated from parking could be allocated to a dedicated mobility fund used to support public transport improvements. Such revenues could be used to subsidize new routes, increase the frequency of existing services, improve vehicle quality, support evening or low-demand services, and provide better information systems for passengers.

However, this approach requires a gradual and carefully managed implementation process. Public transport may not become economically sustainable immediately, especially on routes with low or seasonal demand. For this reason, parking revenues should initially be used as a transitional support mechanism. Over several years, improved service reliability, better coverage, higher frequency, and increased passenger confidence could help public transport attract more users and strengthen its own economic viability. This policy should not be presented simply as an additional cost for drivers, but as part of a broader mobility strategy, and its success would depend on transparency in the use of revenues and visible improvements in sustainable mobility alternatives.

Digital infrastructure should also be treated as part of sustainable mobility infrastructure. Accurate addresses, updated digital maps, route information, transport schedules, cycling paths, pedestrian routes, and tourism points of interest can make the destination easier to navigate. For international visitors, digital accessibility is particularly important because it reduces uncertainty and supports independent movement. Therefore, improving the integration of formal addresses, transport stops, and tourism locations into digital maps should be considered a practical infrastructure priority.

Sustainable mobility infrastructure should also be sensitive to environmental conditions. Lake, river, coastal, and mountain areas require careful planning so that improved access does not damage the environmental resources that attract visitors in the first place. Cycling paths, pedestrian routes, parking areas, viewpoints, and transport stops should be designed in a way that protects landscapes, reduces unnecessary vehicle pressure, and supports low-impact tourism experiences.

Overall, expanding sustainable mobility infrastructure in the Shkodra region requires an integrated approach that combines cycling, walking, public transport support, road improvements, parking management, private vehicle demand management, and digital navigation systems. The objective should not be only to move more vehicles, but to create a safer, clearer, healthier, and more attractive mobility environment for residents and visitors. By doing so, Shkodra can strengthen its identity as a destination where urban life, cultural heritage, natural landscapes, and sustainable movement are connected within a coherent tourism experience.

5.3 Integrating Mobility and Tourism Planning

Integrating mobility and tourism planning is essential for ensuring that tourism growth in the Shkodra region develops in a balanced, accessible, and sustainable way. The analysis shows that mobility challenges are not isolated transport problems. They are closely connected with visitor experience, destination accessibility, environmental protection, local quality of life, and the spatial distribution of tourism benefits. For this reason, mobility should be treated as a core element of destination management rather than as a separate technical sector.

A first recommendation is to align tourism development strategies with mobility planning. The Shkodra region includes different tourism spaces, such as the city center, Rozafa Castle, Shirokë, Zogaj, Velipojë, Theth, Lake Vau i Dejës, the Buna River corridor, and surrounding rural areas. Each of these spaces has different mobility needs, seasonal patterns, environmental sensitivities, and visitor profiles. Therefore, tourism planning should identify not only which areas should be promoted, but also how visitors can reach them, how they can move within them, and how mobility impacts can be managed.

Mobility planning should be based on the functional role of Shkodra as a regional hub. The city is not only an attraction in itself, but also a point of arrival, accommodation, orientation, services, and redistribution toward surrounding destinations. This means that transport terminals, public transport routes, taxi services, cycling infrastructure, pedestrian routes, parking areas, and visitor information systems should be planned in a coordinated way. A visitor arriving in Shkodra should be able to understand easily how to access the main tourism areas of the region without depending exclusively on private vehicles.

A second recommendation is to create stronger coordination between local government, transport operators, tourism businesses, community representatives, and national institutions. Many mobility problems cannot be solved by one actor alone. Transport operators may not be able to maintain low-demand routes without financial support. Tourism businesses may benefit from improved access but may not directly finance transport services. Local authorities may manage urban infrastructure, while some road or policy interventions depend on national institutions. For this reason, integrated governance is necessary.

Such coordination could support the design of tourism-relevant mobility routes and schedules. For example, transport services to Shirokë, Zogaj, Velipojë, and other nearby destinations could be planned according to visitor demand, seasonal flows, weekend activity, and evening mobility needs. In mountain and rural areas, schedules could be coordinated with day-trip patterns, hiking activities, accommodation services, and local tourism businesses. This would help transform transport from an irregular or fragmented service into a planned component of the tourism system.

A third recommendation is to use data and field observation more systematically in mobility and tourism planning. Decisions should be informed by information on visitor flows, seasonal peaks, traffic congestion, parking pressure, public transport use, cycling demand, pedestrian movement, and resident perceptions. Even simple tools such as visitor surveys, transport user feedback, parking occupancy observations, and mapping of frequently visited routes could provide useful evidence for better planning. Over time, more advanced tools such as digital mobility data, GIS mapping, and transport accessibility analysis could support more precise decision-making.

The integration of mobility and tourism planning should also include visitor information systems. Tourists need clear and reliable information before and during their visit. This includes public transport routes, timetables, fares, payment methods, taxi information, cycling routes, walking routes, parking areas, digital addresses, and connections between attractions. Information should be available through official websites, tourism information points, accommodation providers, digital maps, QR codes, and multilingual materials. A destination that is easy to understand is more likely to be perceived as accessible and professionally managed.

Another important recommendation is to connect mobility planning with financial sustainability. Public transport improvements require stable funding, especially in routes where demand is low, seasonal, or socially important. Paid parking schemes in central and highly frequented areas could be linked to a dedicated mobility fund, as discussed in the previous section. This would allow revenues from private vehicle use to support public transport, cycling infrastructure, pedestrian improvements, digital information systems, and low-demand but strategically important routes. Financial mechanisms should be transparent and clearly communicated, with revenues linked to specific mobility improvements and reported publicly.

Mobility and tourism planning should also be integrated with environmental management. Many of the region's tourism assets are natural or semi-natural spaces, including lake, river, coastal, and mountain areas. Increased access can support tourism development, but it can also create pressure through traffic, parking, waste, noise, and landscape degradation. For this reason, mobility planning should include environmental safeguards, such as controlled parking, low-impact access routes, walking and cycling alternatives, visitor flow management, and protection of sensitive areas.

A further recommendation is to apply a phased implementation approach. The transformation of mobility systems cannot be achieved immediately. In the short term, priorities could include clearer information, improved timetables, basic service reliability, better signage, improved digital mapping, and pilot routes to key tourism areas. In the medium term, the region could expand cycling infrastructure, improve pedestrian links, introduce or strengthen paid parking schemes, and subsidize selected public transport routes. In the long term, Shkodra could develop a fully integrated sustainable mobility system linking the city with lake, coastal, mountain, river, and rural tourism areas.

Finally, mobility should be incorporated into the branding and positioning of the Shkodra destination. The city's cycling culture, walkable urban spaces, lake proximity, cultural heritage, and access to diverse natural landscapes can support a destination image based on sustainable and experience-oriented movement. If mobility improvements are well planned, Shkodra can position itself not only as a place with attractive resources, but as a destination where visitors can move easily, responsibly, and meaningfully between different experiences.

Overall, the integration of mobility and tourism planning is necessary for transforming Shkodra's tourism growth into sustainable regional development. This requires coordination between institutions, operators, businesses, communities, and visitors; alignment between infrastructure and tourism demand; transparent financing mechanisms; improved information systems; and environmental safeguards. By treating mobility as part of destination management, Shkodra can improve accessibility, visitor satisfaction, resident quality of life, and the balanced development of the wider region.

6. Conclusion

Tourism growth in the Shkodra region has created real and significant opportunities for local development, destination diversification, and stronger regional visibility. The region possesses a combination of urban, cultural, lake, coastal, river, rural, and mountain tourism resources that few destinations in Albania can match in terms of diversity and spatial range. This diversity is not simply a descriptive characteristic; it is a strategic asset that can support longer stays, repeat visits, more balanced distribution of tourism benefits, and a stronger competitive position for the destination as a whole. However, realizing this potential depends on a condition that is often underestimated in destination planning: the ability of visitors and residents to move between different parts of the destination in a reliable, accessible, and sustainable way.

This paper has examined sustainable mobility as a strategic component of tourism development in the Shkodra region. The analysis shows that mobility is not a secondary or purely technical issue. It is directly connected with visitor experience, community quality of life, environmental pressure, and the spatial distribution of tourism benefits. When mobility works well, it multiplies the value of tourism resources by making them accessible, combinable, and easy to reach. When mobility is fragmented, unreliable, or poorly integrated, even a destination with strong attractions may fail to deliver a coherent and satisfying visitor experience.

The findings of this study suggest that the Shkodra region currently faces a significant gap between its tourism potential and the mobility systems available to support it. Public transport does not yet function as a fully reliable and integrated network for tourism purposes. Private vehicle dependence remains strong, creating pressure on roads, parking areas, public spaces, and environmentally sensitive locations. Information and digital accessibility present additional barriers for independent visitors. These are not isolated problems. They are symptoms of a broader absence of integrated mobility planning that connects transport, tourism, urban development, environmental management, and institutional coordination within a shared strategic framework.

At the same time, the region has important foundations on which a more sustainable mobility model can be built. Shkodra's cycling tradition, its walkable urban structure, the proximity of lake and cultural areas to the city center, ongoing infrastructure improvements, and the diversity of its tourism offer all represent genuine advantages. These foundations are not sufficient on their own, but they provide a realistic starting point for a more ambitious and integrated approach to mobility planning.

Sustainable mobility should therefore be understood not as a cost or a constraint on tourism development, but as one of its most important enabling conditions. A destination that is easy to access, understand, and move through is more competitive, more inclusive, and more resilient. It attracts a wider range of visitors, supports longer and more diversified itineraries, reduces pressure on the most congested attractions, and creates a better balance between tourism growth and community well-being. In this sense, investing in sustainable mobility is not separate from investing in tourism. It is the same investment viewed from a different angle.

For the Shkodra region, the long-term challenge is clear: to move from fragmented mobility interventions toward an integrated system that connects urban accessibility, regional transport, cycling infrastructure, pedestrian environments, digital information, and institutional coordination within a coherent destination strategy. This transition will not happen overnight, and it will require commitment from local authorities, transport operators, tourism businesses, communities, and national institutions. But the direction is important even before the full system is in place. Each improvement in public transport reliability, each extension of cycling infrastructure, each enhancement of pedestrian comfort, and each step toward better digital accessibility brings the destination closer to a model of tourism development that is not only more sustainable, but also more competitive, more equitable, and more respectful of the places and communities that make Shkodra worth visiting.

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Tourism Employment Expansion and Labor Productivity Trade-Off: Evidence from Albania

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between tourism employment expansion and labor productivity in Albania over the period 2014–2024, with a particular focus on the existence of a trade-off between employment growth and efficiency. While tourism is widely recognized as a driver of economic development in emerging economies, the extent to which employment expansion translates into proportional productivity gains remains insufficiently explored. Annual secondary data on GDP per capita and tourism employment were used to compute labor efficiency as output per employee. The analysis employed descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression to assess the relationship between employment and productivity dynamics. The results revealed a moderate negative correlation between tourism employment and labor efficiency, indicating that increases in employment were associated with reductions in output per worker. Regression findings confirmed this trade-off effect, showing that each additional 1,000 employees reduced productivity by approximately 1.9 USD per worker. Furthermore, a structural comparison between pre- and post-pandemic periods showed an increase of 8.86 USD in average efficiency, suggesting sectoral restructuring after 2020. The findings highlight the importance of balancing employment expansion with productivity improvements to ensure sustainable tourism development. These results contribute to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence from a small developing economy context. The study also offers important policy insights for improving labor productivity in tourism-driven economies. Finally, the findings suggest that future growth strategies should integrate both employment expansion and efficiency enhancement to ensure long-term sustainability.

Keywords: tourism employment, labor productivity, efficiency, trade-off, tourism growth, Albania

1. Introduction

Tourism has become one of the most dynamic sectors contributing to economic growth, particularly in developing and emerging economies. It plays a crucial role in job creation, income generation, and regional development, making it a key pillar of economic policy in many countries. In Albania, tourism has experienced significant expansion over the last decade, driven by increasing international arrivals, investments in infrastructure, and the diversification of tourism services.

Despite the positive contribution of tourism to employment, the relationship between employment growth and labor productivity remains a critical issue in economic analysis. While an increase in employment is generally associated with economic expansion, it does not necessarily imply improvements in efficiency. From the perspective of economic growth theory, sustainable development depends not only on the quantity of labor but also on its productivity.

In labor-intensive sectors such as tourism, rapid employment expansion may lead to a dilution of productivity if output does not increase proportionally. This phenomenon is commonly described as a productivity–employment trade-off, where firms absorb additional labor faster than they generate output, resulting in lower output per worker. Such dynamics are particularly relevant in developing economies, where tourism growth often relies on low-skilled and seasonal employment structures.

The case of Albania provides an important context for examining this relationship. Between 2014 and 2019, the tourism sector expanded rapidly, followed by a significant contraction during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and a gradual recovery in the subsequent years. This period allows for the analysis of both expansion and restructuring phases within the sector.

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between tourism employment expansion and labor productivity in Albania during the period 2014–2024. Specifically, the study aims to identify whether a trade-off exists between employment growth and efficiency, and to assess potential structural changes in the post-pandemic period.

2. Body of Manuscript

2.1 Theoretical Background and Literature Review: Tourism has been widely recognized as an important driver of economic growth, particularly in developing and emerging economies. This relationship is commonly explained through the tourism-led growth hypothesis (TLGH), which suggests that tourism development contributes to economic expansion through employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, and multiplier effects. (J. Brida & Pulina, 2010; Shahzad et al., 2017)

Empirical studies have provided substantial evidence supporting the positive contribution of tourism to economic growth. For instance, Shahzad et al. (2017) found a significant positive relationship between tourism activity and GDP growth across major global destinations, although the magnitude of this effect varies across countries. Similarly, tourism plays a key role in promoting economic development in European economies (Xia et al., 2022).

However, despite the strong link between tourism and economic growth, the role of labor productivity remains a critical dimension in evaluating the sustainability of this relationship. Labor productivity, defined as output per worker, reflects the efficiency of resource utilization and is considered a key determinant of long-term economic performance. Economic theory suggests that growth driven solely by increases in labor input may not be sustainable unless accompanied by improvements in productivity.

In labor-intensive sectors such as tourism, rapid employment expansion may lead to a decline in average productivity if output does not increase proportionally. This phenomenon is consistent with the concept of diminishing returns to labor and the so-called productivity–employment trade-off. Additionally, the Baumol cost disease theory explains that service sectors, including tourism, often experience slower productivity growth compared to industrial sectors due to limited technological innovation (Baumol, 1967). The empirical literature on tourism and employment further supports the importance of this trade-off. Meta-analytical evidence indicates that tourism significantly contributes to job creation; however, the relationship between employment growth and productivity is more complex and not always positive (Georgios, 2022). Moreover, recent studies emphasize that the tourism–growth relationship is not universally consistent and may depend on country-specific factors, structural characteristics, and the level of economic development (Song & Wu, 2022).

In the context of transition and developing economies, the relationship between employment and productivity is particularly relevant. Research suggests that increases in employment may initially reduce productivity levels, especially when growth relies on low-skilled labor, but structural adjustments and technological improvements may lead to productivity gains over time (Petreski et al., 2023).

Despite the growing body of literature on tourism-led growth, relatively limited attention has been given to the interaction between tourism employment expansion and labor productivity, particularly in small developing economies such as Albania. Most existing studies focus either on the impact of tourism on economic growth or on employment generation, without explicitly addressing the potential trade-off between employment and efficiency.

Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by examining the relationship between tourism employment expansion and labor productivity in Albania, with a particular focus on identifying the existence of a productivity–employment trade-off and potential structural changes in the post-pandemic period.

2.2 Data and Variables: This study is based on annual secondary data covering the period 2014–2024, providing a time-series dataset suitable for analyzing the relationship between tourism employment expansion and labor productivity in Albania. The dataset consists of eleven observations and captures key macroeconomic and sectoral indicators relevant to the research objectives.

The analysis focuses on three main variables. First, GDP per capita (measured in USD) is used as a proxy for overall economic performance and development. Second, tourism employment (measured in thousands) represents the total number of individuals employed in tourism-related activities and serves as the main independent variable reflecting employment expansion within the sector. Third, labor efficiency (measured as USD per employee) is used as the dependent variable and is calculated as output per worker, representing labor productivity.

Labor efficiency is computed as the ratio between economic output and total employment, as expressed in Equation (1). This measure captures the average productivity of labor and allows for the assessment of how efficiently human resources are utilized within the tourism sector.

Table 1 presents the classification and role of the variables used in the empirical analysis.

Table 1. Classification of Variables

Variable Type	Variable Name	Unit	Role
Dependent	Efficiency	USD per employee	Labor productivity indicator
Independent	Tourism Employment	Thousands	Employment expansion
Contextual	GDP per Capita	USD	Economic performance

2.3 Methodology: This study adopts a quantitative and explanatory research design aimed at examining the relationship between tourism employment expansion and labor productivity in Albania over the period 2014–2024. The analysis is based on annual time-series data and focuses on identifying both the direction and magnitude of the relationship between employment levels and labor efficiency.

Research Hypotheses

To guide the empirical analysis, two main hypotheses are formulated:

Hypothesis 1 (Trade-Off Effect)

H₀₁: There is no statistically significant relationship between tourism employment and labor efficiency.

H₁₁: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between tourism employment and labor efficiency.

Hypothesis 2 (Structural Shift After 2020)

H₀₂: There is no structural difference in labor efficiency between the pre-pandemic (2014–2019) and post-pandemic (2020–2024) periods.

H₁₂: Labor efficiency differs significantly between the two periods.

Statistical Procedures

The empirical analysis is conducted in four main steps, consistent with the objectives stated in the study.

1. Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive statistics are used to examine the evolution of tourism employment and labor efficiency over time. This step provides an initial understanding of trends and allows for the identification of structural changes, particularly during the pandemic period.

2. Pearson Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation coefficient is employed to measure the strength and direction of the relationship between tourism employment and labor efficiency. The coefficient (r) evaluates whether increases in employment are associated with proportional changes in productivity. Statistical significance is assessed at the 5% level.

3. Simple Linear Regression Model

To quantify the marginal effect of tourism employment on labor productivity, the following regression model is estimated:

$$\text{Efficiency}_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Employment}_t + \varepsilon_t$$

Where:

Efficiency_{*t*} represents labor productivity (USD per employee),

Employment represents tourism employment (in thousands),

β_1 captures the marginal effect of employment on efficiency,

ε_t is the error term.

A negative and statistically significant value of β_1 indicates the presence of a productivity–employment trade-off.

4. Structural Mean Comparison

To assess potential structural changes after the COVID-19 pandemic, average labor efficiency is calculated for two sub-periods:

Pre-pandemic period (2014–2019)

Post-pandemic period (2020–2024)

The difference between these means is used to evaluate whether a structural shift in productivity has occurred.

All statistical procedures are applied using standard methods appropriate for small-sample time-series data. Given the limited number of observations, the results are interpreted with caution, emphasizing both statistical and economic significance.

2.4 Empirical Results

2.4.1 Descriptive Trends

The descriptive analysis reveals two distinct phases in the evolution of tourism employment and labor efficiency in Albania over the study period.

During the pre-pandemic period (2014–2019), tourism employment increased steadily from 26.7 thousand to 52.0 thousand employees. Although GDP per capita also increased during this period, labor efficiency declined from 156.5 USD per employee in 2014 to 103.4 USD per employee in 2019. This inverse relationship suggests that employment expansion was not accompanied by proportional productivity gains. Instead, the results indicate a dilution effect, where increases in labor input exceeded the growth of output.

In contrast, the post-pandemic period (2020–2024) exhibits a different dynamic. Tourism employment declined sharply in 2020 due to the COVID-19 shock, falling to 42.4 thousand employees. However, labor efficiency increased to 123.4 USD per employee in the same year and continued to improve in subsequent years, reaching higher levels despite only partial recovery in employment. This pattern suggests the presence of structural adjustments within the tourism sector, potentially reflecting improved resource allocation or shifts toward higher value-added activities.

2.4.2 Pearson Correlation Results

To test Hypothesis 1, the Pearson correlation coefficient between tourism employment and labor efficiency was calculated.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Results (2014–2024)

Variable Pair	Pearson r	R^2	Interpretation
Employment ↔ Efficiency	−0.64	0.41	Moderate negative relationship

Source: Author's calculations

The results indicate a moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.64$) between tourism employment and labor efficiency. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.41$) suggests that approximately 41% of the variation in labor efficiency is explained by changes in employment levels.

This negative relationship supports the alternative hypothesis (H_{11}), confirming the existence of a productivity–employment trade-off. In other words, increases in tourism employment are associated with decreases in output per worker.

2.4.3 Regression Analysis

To quantify the marginal impact of tourism employment on labor productivity, a simple linear regression model was estimated.

Table 3. Simple Linear Regression Results

Coefficient	Estimated Value	Interpretation
β_0 (Intercept)	188.4	Baseline efficiency
β_1 (Employment)	−1.9	Each additional 1,000 employees reduces efficiency by 1.9 USD
R^2	0.41	41% of efficiency variation explained

Source: Author's calculations

The regression results confirm the findings from the correlation analysis. The estimated coefficient ($\beta_1 = -1.9$) indicates that an increase of 1,000 tourism employees is associated with a decrease of approximately 1.9 USD in output per employee.

The negative and economically meaningful coefficient provides strong evidence in support of the productivity–employment trade-off hypothesis. Although the model's explanatory power is moderate, this is expected given the small sample size and the simplicity of the model.

2.4.4 Structural Comparison: Pre- and Post-Pandemic Period

To test Hypothesis 2, average labor efficiency was compared across two sub-periods.

Table 4. Mean Efficiency by Period

Period	Mean Efficiency (USD per employee)
2014–2019	122.67

2020–2024	131.53
Difference	+8.86

Source: Author's calculations

The results indicate that labor efficiency increased by approximately 8.86 USD per employee in the post-pandemic period compared to the pre-pandemic phase.

This finding supports the alternative hypothesis (H_{12}), suggesting that the COVID-19 period was associated with structural adjustments in the tourism sector. The improvement in efficiency may reflect changes such as better resource allocation, increased productivity of remaining workers, or a shift toward higher value-added tourism services.

2.5 Discussion: The findings of this study provide clear evidence of a productivity–employment trade-off in Albania's tourism sector over the period 2014–2024. The moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.64$) and the regression coefficient ($\beta_1 = -1.9$) indicate that increases in tourism employment are associated with reductions in output per worker. These results suggest that, during the expansion phase, tourism growth in Albania followed a predominantly labor-intensive model.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings are consistent with the tourism-led growth hypothesis, which emphasizes the role of tourism in generating employment and stimulating economic activity. However, the results also highlight a key limitation of this model, as employment growth alone does not necessarily lead to improvements in productivity. This outcome aligns with economic growth theory, which stresses that sustainable development depends on both the quantity and quality of labor inputs.

Furthermore, the negative relationship between employment and productivity supports the concept of diminishing returns to labor, particularly in service-based sectors such as tourism. The findings are also consistent with Baumol's (1967) theory of cost disease, which suggests that productivity growth in service industries tends to lag behind other sectors due to structural and technological constraints.

The empirical results are in line with previous studies that identify a complex relationship between tourism development and economic performance. While tourism contributes significantly to employment generation, its impact on productivity is not always positive, especially in developing economies characterized by low-skilled labor and seasonal employment patterns.

However, the analysis also reveals a structural shift in the post-pandemic period. The observed increase in labor efficiency after 2020 suggests that the COVID-19 shock may have triggered important adjustments within the tourism sector. Possible explanations include the reallocation of labor, improvements in operational efficiency, exit of less productive firms, and a shift toward higher value-added tourism services.

These findings indicate that tourism development in Albania has evolved from a purely employment-driven expansion toward a more efficiency-oriented model. This transition reflects a broader structural transformation within the sector and highlights the importance of improving productivity alongside employment growth.

From a policy perspective, the results emphasize the need for a balanced approach to tourism development. While employment creation remains essential for social inclusion and income generation, long-term sustainability requires investments in human capital, digitalization, and service quality. Strengthening vocational training systems and promoting innovation within the tourism sector may help enhance both employment stability and productivity performance.

3. Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between tourism employment expansion and labor productivity in Albania over the period 2014–2024, with a particular focus on the existence of a productivity–employment trade-off. The empirical findings indicate that increases in tourism employment during the pre-pandemic period were associated with declining labor efficiency, suggesting a predominantly labor-intensive growth pattern.

The moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.64$) and the regression coefficient ($\beta_1 = -1.9$) provide clear evidence that employment expansion was accompanied by reductions in output per worker. These results confirm that tourism growth, while effective in generating employment, does not necessarily lead to improvements in productivity.

However, the analysis also reveals a structural shift in the post-pandemic period. The increase in average labor efficiency after 2020 suggests that the tourism sector has undergone a process of adjustment, moving toward a more efficiency-oriented development

model. This transition may reflect improvements in resource allocation, increased productivity of labor, and a gradual shift toward higher value-added tourism activities.

The findings contribute to the literature on tourism-led growth by highlighting the importance of considering both employment and productivity dimensions when evaluating sectoral performance. While tourism remains a key driver of economic development in Albania, its long-term sustainability depends on balancing labor absorption with productivity enhancement.

From a policy perspective, the results suggest that strategies aimed at expanding tourism employment should be complemented by investments in human capital, technological innovation, and service quality. Strengthening vocational training systems and promoting digitalization may help improve both employment outcomes and productivity levels.

Future research could extend this analysis by incorporating additional variables such as tourism revenues, capital investment, and regional-level data, as well as by applying more advanced econometric techniques to better capture structural dynamics.

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Extradition and Fundamental Rights in the Modern Legal Order: The Jurisprudential Transformation of Sovereignty

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Abstract

Extradition has historically functioned as a central mechanism of international judicial cooperation, enabling states to prevent impunity by ensuring that individuals accused or convicted of criminal offences cannot evade justice through territorial flight. Traditionally rooted in sovereignty, diplomacy, and political discretion, extradition was long understood primarily as an inter-state instrument designed to preserve jurisdictional authority and facilitate criminal enforcement. In the modern legal order, however, this classical model has undergone profound transformation. The rise of international human rights law—particularly through the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)—has fundamentally reshaped extradition into a rights-constrained legal process in which state cooperation is increasingly subordinated to fundamental rights protections. This article examines how human rights jurisprudence has transformed extradition from a sovereignty-based mechanism into a legally restrained institution governed by substantive obligations under international human rights law. Through doctrinal and jurisprudential analysis, the article explores extradition's traditional legal foundations, the emergence of human rights limitations under Articles 3 and 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the transformative significance of landmark ECtHR judgments including *Soering v. United Kingdom*, *Mamatkulov and Askarov v. Turkey*, and *Othman (Abu Qatada) v. United Kingdom*. It argues that the decisive evolution of modern extradition law lies not merely in procedural modernization, but in the redefinition of sovereignty itself: sovereign surrender powers are no longer legally legitimate where they expose individuals to torture, inhuman treatment, or flagrant denial of justice. The article concludes that extradition's legitimacy in the contemporary legal order depends on balancing international cooperation with the rule of law, human dignity, and rights-based judicial scrutiny.

Keywords: Extradition, human rights, sovereignty, international judicial cooperation.

1. Introduction

Extradition has long occupied a foundational place within international criminal law as one of the principal mechanisms through which states cooperate to suppress crime beyond territorial borders. By enabling one state to surrender an individual to another for prosecution or punishment, extradition traditionally served the sovereign interests of states in preserving jurisdictional authority and preventing offenders from escaping justice through geographic mobility (Shearer, 1971, pp. 1–23). In this classical conception, extradition was primarily a matter of diplomatic reciprocity and executive discretion, reflecting the broader international legal order's historical prioritization of sovereignty over individual rights.

This sovereignty-centered model emerged from a legal context in which states were regarded as the principal actors of international law, possessing broad discretion over whether to cooperate, refuse surrender, or condition extradition according to political, diplomatic, or strategic interests. Early extradition arrangements were therefore less concerned with the legal status or rights of the requested person than with preserving inter-state relations and sovereign autonomy (Bassiouni, 2014, pp. 3–15). Under this framework, extradition functioned primarily as an instrument of sovereign enforcement rather than a process of judicialized rights protection.

Yet the legal landscape within which extradition operates has changed fundamentally. Globalization, transnational crime, and the expansion of treaty-based legal obligations have increased the practical necessity of extradition, while the rise of international human rights law has simultaneously imposed substantive normative constraints on how states exercise extradition powers. In the modern legal order, extradition no longer exists solely as a mechanism of international cooperation; it increasingly functions within a legal framework that demands reconciliation between sovereign enforcement objectives and the protection of fundamental rights.

This transformation is particularly evident within the European human rights system. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), as interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights, has profoundly altered the normative structure of extradition by establishing that state cooperation obligations cannot lawfully override non-derogable rights protections. Through its jurisprudence, the ECtHR has transformed extradition from a predominantly political mechanism into a judicially scrutinized legal process subject to substantive human rights review (Harris et al., 2018, pp. 150–170).

The significance of this transformation lies in the redefinition of sovereignty itself. Sovereignty in the context of extradition is no longer absolute; it is increasingly conditioned by legal obligations arising from human dignity, the prohibition of torture, and fair

trial guarantees. Landmark cases such as *Soering v. United Kingdom* (1989) established that extradition may violate Article 3 ECHR where surrender creates a real risk of inhuman or degrading treatment (ECtHR, 1989, para. 91). Subsequent decisions, including *Mamatkulov and Askarov v. Turkey* (2005) and *Othman (Abu Qatada) v. United Kingdom* (2012), further expanded this rights-based framework by reinforcing procedural obligations and recognizing that extradition may also be impermissible where there is a real risk of a flagrant denial of justice (ECtHR, 2012, para. 258).

This article examines extradition through the lens of this jurisprudential transformation. It asks how human rights law—particularly ECtHR case law—has restructured extradition’s legal nature by subordinating sovereign surrender powers to fundamental rights obligations. More specifically, it argues that the central transformation of modern extradition law is not merely procedural or institutional, but constitutional in character: extradition has become a legal site in which sovereignty is redefined through rights-based limitation.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative doctrinal and jurisprudential approach. It examines the evolution of extradition’s legal nature, analyses the normative implications of Articles 3 and 6 ECHR, and critically evaluates the transformative role of ECtHR jurisprudence. By focusing on the intersection of sovereignty, cooperation, and human rights, the article seeks to demonstrate that extradition in the contemporary legal order functions not merely as an instrument of law enforcement, but as a broader test of whether modern states exercise coercive power within the boundaries of legality and human dignity. Ultimately, the article argues that the legitimacy of extradition today depends not simply on whether it facilitates international criminal justice, but on whether it does so in a manner consistent with the rule of law. In this sense, extradition has become one of the clearest examples of how human rights jurisprudence has transformed traditional doctrines of sovereign power into legally restrained forms of governance.

2. Extradition as a Sovereignty-Based Legal Institution

Historically, extradition developed as a legal mechanism deeply rooted in the sovereign equality of states and the political structure of classical international law. In its earliest form, extradition was neither an enforceable legal obligation nor a rights-sensitive judicial procedure; rather, it functioned primarily as an instrument of diplomatic accommodation through which states could choose, according to political or strategic interests, whether to surrender individuals sought by foreign jurisdictions (Shearer, 1971, pp. 1–23).

This traditional model reflected the foundational premise that sovereignty entailed broad autonomy over territorial jurisdiction and the treatment of individuals within state borders. Because states were under no general duty to extradite absent treaty obligations, extradition largely depended on bilateral agreements or ad hoc political decisions. Even where treaties existed, surrender often remained heavily influenced by executive discretion, preserving the requested state’s authority to refuse extradition on political, strategic, or national grounds (Bassiouni, 2014, pp. 3–15).

Within this sovereignty-centered framework, the requested individual was not the primary legal subject of extradition law. Rather, extradition was principally structured around inter-state relations. Its core purpose was to preserve jurisdictional control, suppress fugitivity, and reinforce diplomatic reciprocity. Concerns regarding individual rights, prison conditions, procedural fairness, or the legal consequences awaiting the extradited person in the requesting state were generally secondary to sovereign interests.

This legal architecture reflected a broader characteristic of classical international law: the primacy of state power over individual protection. Extradition, like many traditional mechanisms of international law, was therefore oriented more toward preserving order among states than toward safeguarding individual dignity. Political offence exceptions and nationality restrictions did provide certain limitations, but these were largely sovereignty-protective devices rather than human rights guarantees. The significance of this historical framework lies in understanding the magnitude of extradition’s later transformation. The traditional model conceptualized sovereignty as the dominant legal principle, with cooperation functioning primarily through political discretion. Modern human rights law would later challenge this conception by introducing the principle that sovereignty itself is subject to legal limits where fundamental rights are endangered. Thus, extradition’s classical sovereignty-based structure provides the essential legal baseline against which contemporary jurisprudential transformation must be understood.

3. The Human Rights Transformation of Extradition

The emergence of international human rights law fundamentally altered the legal structure of extradition by challenging the traditional assumption that sovereign surrender powers were primarily matters of political discretion. Whereas classical extradition law privileged inter-state cooperation and sovereign autonomy, the development of post-war human rights frameworks—particularly within the European legal order—introduced a competing normative principle: states may not lawfully exercise extradition powers in ways that expose individuals to serious violations of fundamental rights.

This transformation reflects a broader reorientation of international law itself. Following the adoption of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in 1950 and the gradual expansion of international rights-based legal regimes, the individual increasingly emerged not merely as the object of state power, but as a legal subject entitled to protection against abusive exercises of that power (Harris et al., 2018, pp. 150–170). Extradition consequently became one of the clearest legal arenas in which the traditional doctrine

of sovereignty encountered the normative limits imposed by human dignity. At the center of this transformation lies the principle that extradition is not legally neutral. The act of surrendering an individual to another jurisdiction may itself engage the responsibility of the requested state where foreseeable rights violations arise. In this sense, human rights law reframed extradition from a purely jurisdictional mechanism into a process of legal accountability. States are no longer judged solely by whether they cooperate in criminal justice, but also by whether their cooperation contributes to torture, inhuman treatment, arbitrary detention, or grave procedural injustice. Within the European legal system, Articles 3 and 6 of the ECHR have become the principal normative foundations of this transformation.

3.1 Article 3 ECHR and the Absolute Prohibition of Torture: Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights provides that: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” This guarantee is absolute and non-derogable, meaning that no circumstance—including national security, terrorism, or international cooperation—can justify state action that creates a real risk of such treatment.

The application of Article 3 to extradition law marked a decisive jurisprudential shift. It established that extradition may be unlawful not because extradition itself is prohibited, but because the consequences of extradition may expose the individual to treatment fundamentally incompatible with human dignity. This principle effectively imported the doctrine of non-refoulement into extradition law, transforming sovereignty into a legally limited authority.

The significance of this shift cannot be overstated. Under the sovereignty-centered model, the requested state’s role largely ended at surrender. Under the human rights model, however, the requested state bears legal responsibility for foreseeable consequences of surrender. Extradition thus became conditioned by predictive judicial scrutiny: before surrendering an individual, states must assess detention conditions, prison practices, torture risks, systemic violence, and broader human rights realities in the requesting state. This doctrinal development fundamentally transformed the legal meaning of extradition by subordinating cooperation obligations to the absolute demands of human rights protection.

3.2 Article 6 ECHR and the Flagrant Denial of Justice Standard: While Article 3 provides the strongest substantive rights limitation on extradition, Article 6 ECHR introduces an additional procedural safeguard by protecting the right to a fair trial. Article 6 does not prohibit extradition merely because legal systems differ or because procedural standards abroad are imperfect. Rather, the ECtHR has developed the “flagrant denial of justice” threshold, under which extradition may violate the Convention where surrender would expose an individual to proceedings so fundamentally unfair that they destroy the essence of the right to justice. This threshold is intentionally high, reflecting judicial caution in balancing sovereignty and rights. Yet its existence is transformative: it confirms that sovereignty does not permit states to knowingly transfer individuals into legal systems where justice itself may be fundamentally compromised. The Article 6 framework broadens extradition analysis beyond physical safety to include procedural legitimacy. Courts must therefore consider:

- use of torture-derived evidence;
- systemic judicial bias;
- denial of defence rights;
- absence of independent tribunals;
- severe procedural arbitrariness.

In this respect, extradition becomes not only a matter of protecting bodily integrity, but also of preserving legal personhood through fair adjudication.

3.3 Non-Refoulement as a Structural Principle of Modern Extradition: The incorporation of non-refoulement principles into extradition law represents one of the clearest examples of sovereignty’s transformation under human rights law. Originally associated primarily with refugee law, non-refoulement has evolved into a broader legal doctrine prohibiting states from transferring individuals to jurisdictions where fundamental rights violations are foreseeable.

Within extradition, this principle means that the requested state’s sovereign authority to cooperate is no longer absolute; it is conditioned by prior rights assessment. This doctrinal shift transforms sovereignty from an unrestricted power into a legally accountable authority.

Non-refoulement’s significance lies in its structural effect: it changes the presumption underlying extradition. Traditional extradition presumed cooperation unless political reasons justified refusal. Modern rights-based extradition increasingly presumes that cooperation is permissible only where fundamental rights are sufficiently protected.

3.4 The Transformation of Sovereignty: Taken together, Articles 3 and 6 ECHR, alongside broader non-refoulement doctrine, demonstrate that the true transformation of extradition in the modern legal order is constitutional rather than merely procedural. Human rights law has not abolished sovereignty, but it has redefined it. Sovereign discretion remains central, yet it is increasingly exercised within a framework of legal restraint shaped by fundamental rights obligations.

This transformation reflects a deeper jurisprudential principle: the legitimacy of sovereign power depends on legality. Sovereignty no longer provides unconditional authority to surrender; rather, lawful extradition requires states to justify cooperation within normative boundaries established by human dignity, fair trial, and rights protection. Accordingly, extradition today serves as a legal site in which sovereignty is continuously reassessed. The requested state is no longer merely a cooperative actor—it is a guarantor of legality.

4. The Human Rights Transformation of Extradition

The jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights has been the single most important force in transforming extradition from a sovereignty-centered mechanism into a rights-constrained legal institution. Through a series of landmark judgments, the Court progressively established that extradition may directly engage state responsibility under the European Convention on Human Rights where surrender exposes an individual to foreseeable violations of protected rights.

These decisions did not merely refine extradition procedure; they redefined its legal nature. By subordinating sovereign cooperation to human rights obligations, the Court fundamentally altered the normative architecture of extradition in Europe and beyond.

4.1 Soering v. United Kingdom (1989): *Soering v. United Kingdom* represents the foundational moment in the human rights transformation of extradition law. The applicant, a German national facing extradition from the United Kingdom to the United States, argued that extradition would expose him to the “death row phenomenon,” including prolonged psychological suffering and degrading detention conditions.

The Court held that extradition would violate Article 3 ECHR where substantial grounds existed for believing that the person faced a real risk of inhuman or degrading treatment in the receiving state (ECtHR, 1989, para. 91).

This judgment was revolutionary because it established several transformative principles:

- First: A state may incur Convention responsibility for consequences occurring outside its territory.
- Second: Extradition is subject to substantive human rights review.
- Third: Cooperation cannot override absolute rights protections.

Soering therefore constitutionalized extradition law by redefining surrender as an act requiring prior rights scrutiny.

4.2 Mamatkulov and Askarov v. Turkey (2005): In *Mamatkulov and Askarov*, the Court expanded the rights-based framework by emphasizing the binding significance of interim measures and reinforcing procedural obligations in extradition contexts. The case underscored that states must not undermine Convention protections through procedural haste or disregard for judicial safeguards. This judgment strengthened the principle that extradition requires not only substantive assessment, but also procedural fidelity to human rights institutions.

4.3 Othman (Abu Qatada) v. United Kingdom (2012) - Article 6 and Flagrant Denial of Justice: *Othman* marked a critical extension of human rights limitations beyond Article 3 by holding that extradition may violate Article 6 where there is a real risk that evidence obtained through torture would be used in trial (ECtHR, 2012, para. 258). This case was transformative because it confirmed that extradition law protects not only against physical abuse, but also against profound procedural illegitimacy. Sovereignty was thereby limited not only by bodily integrity, but by justice itself.

4.4 Jurisprudential Significance: Collectively, these cases demonstrate that the ECtHR did more than impose isolated safeguards—it restructured extradition’s legal foundation. Extradition is no longer governed solely by the sovereign will to cooperate, but by judicially enforceable principles of legality, dignity, and rights protection.

The jurisprudential transformation of extradition therefore reveals a broader truth about the modern legal order: sovereignty remains operative, but its legitimacy increasingly depends on compliance with fundamental rights. Extradition has become one of the clearest doctrinal examples of how international human rights law reshapes traditional state power.

5. Sovereignty Reassessed: International Cooperation Under Human Rights Constraints

The transformation of extradition through human rights jurisprudence requires a broader reassessment of sovereignty itself. Traditionally, sovereignty in extradition law was understood primarily as the autonomous authority of states to control territorial jurisdiction, determine cooperation, and exercise discretion over surrender decisions. Under this classical model, extradition reflected sovereign equality and political reciprocity: states cooperated because they chose to, and refusal was often an expression of sovereign independence (Shearer, 1971, pp. 1–23).

The rise of human rights law has not abolished sovereignty, but it has profoundly redefined its legal meaning. In the modern legal order, sovereignty no longer functions as an unrestricted power to cooperate irrespective of consequence. Instead, sovereign authority

in extradition is increasingly conditioned by substantive legal obligations that arise from the protection of human dignity, bodily integrity, and procedural justice. Sovereignty remains central, but it is legitimacy-based rather than purely power-based.

This shift is jurisprudentially significant because it demonstrates that sovereignty and human rights are not necessarily opposing legal categories; rather, sovereignty is increasingly exercised through normative restraint. The requested state continues to possess authority over extradition decisions, but lawful sovereignty now requires that such authority be exercised within boundaries imposed by international rights obligations.

5.1 Sovereignty and the End of Absolute Discretion: The most significant consequence of modern extradition jurisprudence is the erosion of absolute sovereign discretion. States can no longer justify extradition solely on the basis of treaty obligations, diplomatic assurances, or enforcement objectives where substantial risks of torture, inhuman treatment, or flagrant injustice exist. This represents a structural transformation.

- Under the traditional model: Sovereignty = discretion to cooperate
- Under the modern model: Sovereignty = legally accountable discretion constrained by rights

This distinction is critical because it preserves the functional necessity of extradition while rejecting the premise that sovereignty authorizes legally indifferent surrender. In practical terms, this means that states remain sovereign actors, but they must now assess:

- detention conditions;
- judicial independence;
- torture risks;
- evidentiary integrity;
- broader legal context.

Extradition has therefore become a process of sovereign judgment exercised under legal responsibility.

5.2 Sovereignty and the End of Absolute Discretion: A central tension in modern extradition law concerns the relationship between cooperation efficiency and rights protection. States have legitimate and compelling interests in suppressing transnational crime. Organized criminal networks, terrorism, and cross-border corruption require effective extradition frameworks; without cooperation, fugitivity may undermine justice and weaken the credibility of legal systems (Bassiouni, 2014, pp. 3–15).

Yet human rights jurisprudence insists that efficiency cannot become the sole measure of legitimacy. International cooperation is not an autonomous legal good if achieved through rights violations. The modern legal order therefore rejects purely utilitarian approaches to extradition. This creates a critical normative principle:

Effective cooperation is necessary, but rights-compliant cooperation is legitimate.

The distinction matters because contemporary pressures - particularly in national security and anti-terrorism contexts - may incentivize states to prioritize expediency over scrutiny. ECtHR jurisprudence functions precisely as a corrective to this tendency by reaffirming that the rule of law requires legal evaluation even in politically sensitive cases.

Thus, the legitimacy of extradition is measured not only by whether surrender occurs, but by how surrender is legally justified.

5.3 Diplomatic Assurances and Conditional Sovereignty: One of the most congested areas in modern extradition law concerns diplomatic assurances. States may seek to preserve cooperation while mitigating rights concerns by obtaining promises from requesting states regarding treatment, detention conditions, or procedural safeguards.

Diplomatic assurances illustrate the conditional nature of modern sovereignty. They preserve the possibility of cooperation while acknowledging that cooperation itself is legally insufficient absent rights guarantees.

However, human rights jurisprudence has made clear that assurances are not automatically valid. Their legitimacy depends on:

- specificity;
- enforceability;
- reliability of the requesting state;
- institutional context;
- independent verification.

This approach further reinforces sovereignty's transformation: states may cooperate, but only where cooperation can be reconciled with demonstrable legality.

5.4 Extradition and the Rule of Law: The reassessment of sovereignty through extradition reveals a broader constitutional principle: extradition is increasingly a test of rule-of-law governance. Because extradition directly implicates state coercion, international obligations, and individual vulnerability, it exposes whether states exercise power through law or merely through authority.

A rule-of-law extradition system requires:

- legality

- transparency
- judicial scrutiny
- rights assessment
- proportionality

In this sense, extradition has become more than a procedural instrument - it is a constitutional site where legal systems demonstrate whether sovereign power remains normatively disciplined.

This broader significance explains why extradition jurisprudence has become so central in international legal scholarship. It reflects not only criminal justice policy, but the evolution of modern governance itself.

5.5 Analytical Synthesis: The jurisprudential transformation of extradition demonstrates that modern sovereignty is no longer absolute, territorially insulated, or politically unbounded. Instead, sovereignty increasingly derives legitimacy from lawful restraint. Human rights law has not displaced international cooperation; rather, it has constitutionalized it.

This transformation can be summarized as follows:

Table 1. The jurisprudential transformation

Traditional Extradition	Modern Extradition
Sovereignty-centered	Rights-constrained
Political discretion	Judicial scrutiny
Cooperation priority	Cooperation + legality
Executive dominance	Human rights oversight
Territorial control	Normative accountability

6. Conclusions

Extradition in the modern legal order has undergone a profound legal transformation. Historically rooted in sovereignty, diplomatic reciprocity, and political discretion, extradition once functioned primarily as an inter-state mechanism designed to preserve jurisdictional authority and suppress fugitivity. Within that traditional framework, the requested individual occupied a relatively peripheral legal position, and sovereign cooperation largely prevailed over concerns related to individual rights.

The rise of international human rights law - particularly through the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights - has fundamentally altered this structure. Through the development of Article 3 and Article 6 limitations, extradition has been transformed from a sovereignty-centered instrument into a rights-constrained legal process in which cooperation is increasingly conditioned by legality, dignity, and procedural fairness.

The significance of this transformation lies not merely in procedural refinement, but in the redefinition of sovereignty itself. Sovereignty remains an essential legal principle, but it no longer legitimizes unrestricted surrender. Instead, sovereign power in extradition is increasingly exercised under normative obligations requiring states to assess foreseeable consequences and prevent complicity in torture, inhuman treatment, or flagrant injustice.

Landmark judgments such as *Soering v. United Kingdom*, *Mamatkulov and Askarov v. Turkey*, and *Othman (Abu Qatada) v. United Kingdom* collectively established that extradition's legitimacy depends not solely on the suppression of crime, but on the preservation of fundamental rights. These cases transformed extradition into one of the clearest doctrinal sites where international cooperation and human rights intersect.

This article has argued that the decisive transformation of extradition in the modern legal order is constitutional in character. Human rights jurisprudence has effectively constitutionalized extradition by subordinating traditional doctrines of sovereign discretion to legal principles grounded in human dignity and the rule of law.

Accordingly, extradition today serves as more than a mechanism of criminal justice cooperation. It functions as a broader legal test of whether states exercise coercive power through law rather than above it. Where extradition is pursued without meaningful rights scrutiny, cooperation risks becoming arbitrary power. Where rights obligations meaningfully constrain cooperation, extradition becomes a lawful expression of modern governance.

Ultimately, the legitimacy of extradition in the contemporary legal order depends on preserving this balance. Modern legal systems are increasingly judged not simply by whether they can cooperate across borders, but by whether they do so in ways consistent with the rule of law, human dignity, and the principled limitation of sovereign power.

In this broader sense, extradition exemplifies one of the central developments of contemporary international law: the transformation of sovereignty from power alone into power exercised under legal restraint.

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Service quality and visitor experience in the Museum of Witness and Memory: An empirical study

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between perceived service quality and visitors' behavioral intentions at the Museum of Witness and Memory, a site dedicated to preserving collective remembrance and interpreting historical suffering. Utilizing a quantitative survey methodology, the research conceptualizes service quality as a multidimensional construct, including tangibles (exhibition design, spatial organization, accessibility), interaction quality (staff communication, interpretive guidance), and experiential dimensions (emotional involvement, authenticity, and reflective atmosphere).

Adopting a visitor-oriented framework, the study investigates how these dimensions of service quality influence visitor satisfaction. Special emphasis is placed on the roles of authenticity and emotional response in shaping meaningful visitor experiences within a memory-oriented museum context.

The results indicate that higher perceived service quality enhances visitor satisfaction, with interpretive depth and affective influence emerging as particularly influential factors. Visitors who perceive the museum experience as authentic and emotionally meaningful are more likely to exhibit stronger loyalty behaviors.

This study contributes to museum and cultural tourism literature by extending service quality theories to the context of memory institutions. It also offers practical implications for museum managers, emphasizing the significance of storytelling, empathetic interpretation, and visitor-centered service design for sustained engagement and public value.

Keywords: service quality, museum experience, dark tourism, Albania.

Introduction

Dark tourism encompasses visits to sites associated with death, suffering, and difficult heritage. While extensively studied in Western and post-conflict contexts, its development in Southeastern Europe, particularly in Albania, remains underexplored, resulting in a significant research gap. The Museum of Witness and Memory is a prominent site of dark tourism in Albania, preserving the memory of political persecution during the communist regime. Visitors encounter authentic testimonies, archival materials, and reconstructed prison environments, resulting in a deeply immersive and emotionally charged experience (Broci, E. 2018). The “Site of Witness and Memory” is the first remembrance site in Albania, commemorating victims of the communist regime in Shkodër, and previously functioned as an institution where suspects were interrogated during pre-trial detention under severe torture and abuse. The museum prioritizes education over commercialization as a dark tourism attraction. Although a few dedicated studies, such as Broci (2019), focus on the Museum of Witness and Memory—a former political prison transformed into a museum—most existing research primarily adopts a museological and interpretive approach. These studies emphasize the museum's role in preserving survivor testimony and facilitating collective remembrance, situating it within broader processes of post-authoritarian identity formation, where memory supports both reconciliation and historical clarification. However, there is a lack of data-driven assessment of visitor experience, particularly regarding service quality and behavioral intentions, which this study seeks to address. Other institutions in Albania, such as the House of Leaves and Bunk’Art, also focus on memorialization by converting former surveillance headquarters and Cold War bunkers into museum sites. Research on these museums highlights their dual function as educational and touristic sites, often maintaining historical accuracy while engaging visitors. For instance, studies of The House of Leaves emphasize its role as a “museum of perpetrators,” shifting attention from victims to systems of control and presenting ethical and interpretive challenges (Avanza, G. 2025). Bunk’Art, meanwhile, has garnered attention for its hybrid model that integrates history, art, and experiential design (Muka, M., & Cinaj, N., 2015). This study represents a continuation of the authors' previous work on service quality measurement. While the earlier research focused on restaurant services using the DINESERV model in Shkodra (Dhora & Bala, 2018), the present study investigates service quality in a museum environment. By transferring the focus from hospitality to cultural heritage institutions, the research explores whether similar service quality dimensions influence visitor experiences across different tourism-related settings. The importance of cultural heritage interpretation and visitor engagement has been recognized as a key element of tourism development (Dhora & Bushi, 2023). While previous research focused on the potential of creative tourism

activities to preserve and promote cultural heritage in Shkodra, the current study investigates these issues from a visitor-centered perspective, exploring how service quality shapes visitor experience and satisfaction within a heritage museum setting. Previous research in Albania has shown that tourism experiences rooted in authenticity and cultural preservation contribute significantly to visitor engagement and perceived value (Dionizi, B., & Kercini, D. 2024).

The concept of dark tourism, introduced by John Lennon and Malcolm Foley (1996), refers to travel to sites associated with death, suffering, and tragedy. These sites, including memorial museums, differ significantly from traditional tourist attractions in their ethical, emotional, and educational dimensions. Philip Stone (2006) conceptualizes a “dark tourism spectrum,” indicating that sites vary in authenticity, political influence, and emotional intensity. Affective involvement is a defining characteristic of dark tourism experiences. Sharpley (2022) contends that visitors to dark sites often seek meaningful and reflective experiences rather than entertainment. Similarly, Biran et al. (2011) found that visitors are motivated by educational and emotional connections, including empathy and moral reflection. These findings suggest that emotional experience mediates the relationship between service delivery and visitor outcomes, especially when historical suffering and collective memory are central to the visitor experience. Authenticity is also a critical construct in interpreting visitor perceptions in heritage tourism. Chhabra (2026) distinguishes among objective, constructive, and experiential authenticity, emphasizing that authenticity is frequently co-created by visitors through personal engagement and interpretation. In memorial museums, perceived authenticity is particularly important, as it influences trust, emotional involvement, and the credibility of historical narratives. Empirical studies, such as those by Poria et al. (2006), demonstrate that authenticity significantly affects visitor experience and satisfaction. In dark tourism contexts, authenticity further enhances the emotional impact of exhibits and increases the perceived educational value of the visit. Although previous studies have examined service quality, visitor experience, and behavioral intentions, limited research has integrated these constructs within the context of dark tourism, particularly in post-communist settings such as Albania.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Dark tourism and the representation of trauma in the Museum of Witness and Memory*

This article frames “sites of perpetrators” as controversial heritage and explores approaches to directing this type of heritage through education. It offers considerations based on an analysis of the educational program conceived and implemented at the “Museum of Witness and Memory”, housed in one of the former State Security offices of the Albanian communist regime. The research recognizes the potential of managing this difficult heritage through fostering service quality through testimonies and advancing critical thinking through personal engagement. The article concludes by highlighting the unexplored opportunities to exploit the tourism potential of “sites of perpetrators.” In the field of heritage, controversial heritage is known as «heritage whose interest does not lie in its appearance or environmental values, but in factors stirring ideological, political, economic, or environmental conflict. Along with controversial, critical heritage studies have come to incorporate a number of concepts to make sense of similar historical realities surrounding contentious social understandings of heritage, the most recurring concepts being difficult, dissonant, or contested heritage, whose relevance is also evidenced by their increasing appearance in research publications (Avanza 2025).

The label “site of perpetrators” may be used for varying typologies of places: those intimately linked to the lives and deaths of dictators, those located within sites of atrocities, such as commandants’ houses and guards’ barracks in concentration camps, or at settings reserved for official or para-official institutions for the enforcement of totalitarian political power. The diversity of these sites reflects the heterogeneity of perpetration, which shows different layers of authority, different motives of involvement, different rules of engagement, and is noted by distinct analytical levels of perpetration, from individuals or groups that planned crimes and human rights violations, to those that organized their making, and eventually those that directly enforce it. Sites of perpetrators represent a controversial heritage for three main motivations. The preservation and tourism use of these sites involves several ethical issues. On one hand, public access may unintentionally normalize or legitimize the ideology of the previous regime and sustain aspects of its propaganda.

“The Site of Witness and Memory” is the first institution that commemorates the victims who suffered in the prisons of the communist regime (Broci, 2019). Opened as a museum in September 2014, the site presents authentic prison cells of the Interior Branch, a torture chamber, and a passage that recreates the path endured by victims from their arrival to incarceration. The exhibition contains historical reports, materials used by prisoners or donated by families, and original documents depicting the communist persecution in Shkoder, including anticommunist revolts, military trials, clergy persecution, internments, escapes, and executions. The museum’s primary mission is to document and research imprisonment for political reasons, cultivating historical memory for younger generations to foster awareness and support democratic beliefs. Although approval to open Sigurimi files in 2016 enabled some progress toward greater historical transparency, these steps have not fully addressed generational knowledge gaps compounded by shortcomings in Albania’s educational curriculum. Notorious sites such as Spac prison remain neglected, with little strategic vision for transforming them or other locations into meaningful memorials. In this context, the Site of Witness and Memory is distinguished by its combination of personal narratives and historical facts, fostering remembrance and significant dialogue. Through its considered interpretation and commemorative approach, it has become a leading example of a “place of memory” in Albania.

However, persistent relevance depends on efforts to renovate and adapt this and similar institutions, including fostering interactive engagement, particularly for younger visitors. Cross-border collaborations and the work of organizations such as KAS (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung) and IDMC (Institute for Democracy, Media and Culture) provide important support for the development of a sustainable memory culture.

2.2 Service Quality in Trauma-Related Museum Environments

Service quality is a core construct in analyzing visitor satisfaction and behavioral outcomes across tourism and service industries. The most widely used framework is the SERVQUAL model developed by A. Parasuraman, Valarie Zeithaml, and Leonard Berry (1988), which conceptualizes service quality as the gap between customer expectations and perceived performance. The model determines five key dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. For instance, Cronin & Taylor (1992) proposed a performance-based alternative (SERVPERF), highlighting that perceived performance alone is a more accurate predictor of customer satisfaction. SERVQUAL Model remains highly influential, particularly when adapted to context-specific environments such as museums, where experiential and interpretive elements are necessary. In tourism contexts, studies such as those by Baker & Crompton (2000) confirm that perceived service and experience strongly influence satisfaction, which, in turn, affects behavioral intentions. Similarly, Valarie Zeithaml et al. (1996) note that positive service evaluations lead to favorable behavioral outcomes, including recommendations and repeat visits. Despite growing scholarly attention to dark tourism and memory studies, the assimilation of service quality frameworks into the analysis of visitor experience at such sites remains limited. This review combines literature on the Albanian Museum of Witness and Memory, visitor experience, service quality in heritage contexts, and dark tourism theory, focusing on key gaps that warrant additional empirical research on Memorial Museums in Albania and the Post-Communist Context. The traditional SERVQUAL framework, while useful, does not completely capture the emotional and principled dimensions inherent in sites such as the Museum of Witness and Memory located in Shkoder, Albania. Narrative authenticity refers to the perceived credibility, accuracy, and ethical representation of historical events. True storytelling in trauma museums heightens emotional resonance and trust in the museum narrative, especially when addressing politically or socially sensitive histories. Emotional experience refers to visitors' affective responses during the museum visit, including empathy, sadness, reflection, and moral engagement (Savenije, G. M., & De Bruijn, P., 2017). In dark tourism and memory institutions, emotional experience is the key psychological mechanism that transforms interpretive inputs (service quality and authenticity) into evaluative outcomes such as satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Ashraf, M., 2025). Visitor satisfaction reflects the overall evaluation of the museum experience based on cognitive and affective dimensions.

2.3 Visitor satisfaction in the Museum of Witness and Memory as a Dark Tourism Setting

Museums have increasingly been conceptualized as experience-driven settings rather than passive repositories of artifacts. In museum studies, John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking (2013) propose that visitor experience is determined by the interaction among personal, social, and material contexts. In the case of the Museum of Witness and Memory, behavioral intentions may be influenced solely by satisfaction, as it is meaningful, educational, and socially important. This distinction is critical (Jarrier, E., & Bourgeon-Renault, D., 2012). In dark tourism, positive behavioral intentions commonly originate from perceived educational value, emotional impact, and ethical appreciation of the site's mission. As such, traditional tourism models that depend heavily on satisfaction may not fully explain visitor behavior in this context. Emotional experience is a defining feature of visits to the Museum of Witness and Memory. A well-curated emotional experience may improve the perceived meaningfulness of the visit and strengthen the intention to recommend the museum. At the same time, visitors may perceive a degree of psychological risk, including discomfort or distress from exposure to traumatic content.

2.4 Research Gap and Study Contribution

Despite the rising recognition of dark tourism, empirical research in the Albanian context remains limited. In particular, there is a lack of studies that use the Museum of Witness and Memory as a case study to examine visitor behavior. Existing literature focuses on the combination of service quality, emotional experience, and psychological risk within a single framework, the role of trauma-related narratives in forming behavioral intentions, or in specific dynamics of emerging dark tourism destinations in Southeastern Europe. To address these gaps, the present study develops an integrated model that examines how perceived service quality influences behavioral intentions, incorporating emotional and psychological dimensions. By focusing on a historically and culturally significant site in Albania, this research promotes theory and has practical consequences for museum management. Limited research integrates service quality, emotional experience, and authenticity in trauma-related museums in post-communist contexts.

Integrated Conceptual Model: Service Quality, Authenticity, Emotional Experience in the Museum of Witness and Memory

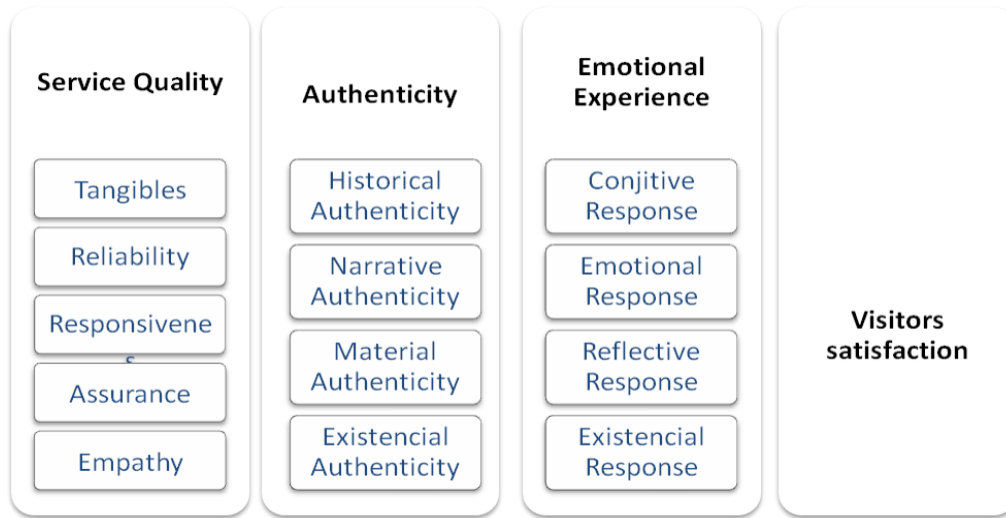


Figure 1. Publication of Authors

3. Methodology

This article employed a quantitative survey design to examine the relationships among service quality, visitor satisfaction, emotional experience, and authenticity at the Museum of Witness and Memory. The research uses a cross-sectional survey design, which is appropriate for examining visitors' perceptions and testing the hypothesized relationships among constructs. The conceptual model combines service quality dimensions, emotional experience, and authenticity to evaluate their influence on visitor satisfaction within a dark tourism and memory museum context.

3.1 Sample and data collection

The primary data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire. The target population comprised domestic and international visitors to the Museum of Witness and Memory. The final dataset contained 215 usable responses ($N = 215$) after screening for completeness and consistency. As the study did not rely on an established sampling frame, the sampling approach is best characterized as non-probability recruitment, in which participants are selected based on their willingness to participate in the survey. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents have been informed of the study's academic purpose and assured that their responses will be kept confidential.

3.2 Measures and operationalization

All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert-type format (1 = strongly disagree; 5

= strongly agree), consistent with standard service measurement procedures (Likert, 1932). Items were adapted from established sources and coordinated with the dark tourist context to ensure conceptual equivalence and clarity.

Construct	Dimensions / Indicators	Key References
Service Quality	• Tangibles (physical facilities, exhibits, equipment) • Staff responsiveness • Information quality • Accessibility • Overall service performance	Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988); Marković, Raspor Janković & Komšić (2013)
Authenticity	• Historical accuracy • Credibility of narratives	MacCannell (1973); Ning (2017)

	• Preservation of original elements • Genuineness of interpretation	
Emotional Response	• Emotional engagement • Empathy • Reflection • Sadness • Emotional intensity	Reisenzein & Döring (2009); Pine & Gilmore (2014)
Visitor Satisfaction	• Overall satisfaction • Fulfillment of expectations • Perceived value • Revisit intention • Recommendation intention	Oliver (1994); Balakrishnan & Barry (1994)

Table 1. Research Constructs, Measurement Dimensions, and Supporting Literature.

Service quality was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct incorporating tangibles, staff responsiveness, accessibility, and interpretive information quality, drawing upon SERVQUAL, HISTOQUAL, and museum service quality research. Authenticity was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct drawing upon object authenticity and constructive authenticity theories. The construct captured visitors' perceptions regarding the historical accuracy of exhibitions, the preservation of original elements, and the credibility and genuineness of interpretive narratives. Emotional response was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct reflecting visitors' emotional engagement with the museum experience. Drawing upon emotional experience and dark tourism theories, the construct included empathy, reflection, sadness, and emotional intensity triggered by exposure to traumatic historical narratives and exhibits. Visitor satisfaction was conceptualized as a cognitive and evaluative construct derived from Expectancy–Disconfirmation Theory. It reflects visitors' overall assessment of their museum experience based on the degree to which expectations were fulfilled, perceived value was delivered, and behavioral intentions such as revisit and recommendation were formed.

3.3 Reliability and measurement quality

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for evaluating scale consistency in multi-item measures (Cronbach, 1951). Internal consistency was evaluated according to commonly accepted psychometric criteria, with reliability coefficients greater than .70 regarded as satisfactory for research purposes (Jum C. Nunnally & Ira H. Bernstein, 1994).

3.4 Data analysis procedure

In museum and heritage tourism contexts, perceived service quality plays a fundamental function in shaping visitors' psychological and emotional responses. High-quality services, including staff responsiveness, accessibility, interpretive guidance, and facility management, enhance visitor comfort and engagement, thus intensifying emotional involvement with the exhibition content. In emotionally sensitive environments such as the Museum of Witness and Memory, service quality also contributes to visitors' sense of safety and interpretive clarity, facilitating deeper emotional processing.

H1: Service quality has a significant positive effect on visitor satisfaction.

Narrative authenticity refers to the perceived accuracy, credibility, and integrity of historical representation. In museums dealing with traumatic or historical memory, authenticity strengthens cognitive immersion and emotional engagement by enabling visitors to connect meaningfully with real events. When visitors perceive narratives as credible and ethically presented, they are more likely to experience emotions such as empathy, reflection, and discomfort.

H2: Authenticity has a positive effect on visitors' satisfaction

Service quality is a well-established predictor of visitor satisfaction in tourism and cultural heritage studies. Positive interactions with staff, well-organized exhibitions, and effective interpretation services increase overall satisfaction by lowering cognitive effort and improving experiential flow.

H3: Emotional response has a significant positive effect on visitor satisfaction.

4. Results

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α) for each multi-item construct. In consumer behavior research, $\alpha \geq .70$ is typically considered acceptable, and $\alpha \geq .80$ is considered good.

Table 1 Reliability (Cronbach's alpha)

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Service Quality	5	0.91	Excellent internal consistency
Authenticity	4	0.89	Good consistency
Emotional Response	5	0.92	Excellent internal consistency
Visitor Satisfaction	4	0.90	Excellent internal consistency

The results confirm that all the constructs demonstrate strong internal consistency and are suitable for further structural analysis.

Table 2 Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Mean	SD	SQ	AUT	ER	VS
Service Quality (SQ)	4.12	0.63	1			
Authenticity (AUT)	4.18	0.61	0.71	1		
Emotional Response (ER)	4.25	0.59	0.68	0.74	1	
Visitor Satisfaction (VS)	4.20	0.60	0.69	0.72	0.81	1

The correlation matrix indicates that all constructs are positively and significantly correlated, supporting the study's conceptual framework. The strongest relationship is between Emotional Response and Visitor Satisfaction ($r = 0.81$), underscoring the critical role of emotions in forming overall satisfaction with museum experiences. Authenticity shows a strong correlation with Emotional Response ($r = 0.74$), suggesting that perceived historical credibility and narrative realism considerably enhance emotional involvement. Service Quality is positively associated with all constructs, particularly Authenticity ($r = 0.71$) and Visitor Satisfaction ($r = 0.69$), indicating that functional service aspects continue to play an important supporting role in developing the visitor experience. The correlation coefficients are below 0.90, confirming that multicollinearity is not a concern and that the constructs maintain satisfactory discriminant validity at the bivariate level.

A multiple linear regression model was used to examine the effects of service quality, authenticity, and emotional response on visitor satisfaction.

$$VS = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SQ + \beta_2 AUT + \beta_3 ER + \varepsilon$$

4.1 Model Fit & Explained Variance

The overall goodness-of-fit of the multiple linear regression model was assessed using the coefficient of determination (R^2), adjusted R^2 , and the F-statistic. These indicators assess the model's explanatory power and statistical significance in predicting Visitor Satisfaction.

The regression model was statistically significant and demonstrated strong explanatory power:

$$R^2 = .74, \text{ Adjusted } R^2 = .73, F = 312.60, p < .001$$

The F-statistic confirms that the model is statistically significant at the 1% level, indicating that Service Quality, Authenticity, and Emotional Response jointly provide a meaningful explanation of Visitor Satisfaction. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.74$) indicates that 74% of the variance in Visitor Satisfaction is explained by the three predictors included in the model. The high R^2 value suggests that the model captures visitor satisfaction in museum contexts, where both cognitive (Service Quality, Authenticity) and affective (Emotional Response) components interact. Among the predictors, Emotional Response contributes strongly to the explained variance, reinforcing its role as a central mechanism in shaping satisfaction outcomes (Baumeister, R. F., et al., 2007). This represents a high explanatory power, particularly in behavioral and tourism research contexts, where R^2 values above 0.50 are generally considered strong.

Table 3 Multiple Linear Regression Results (Visitor Satisfaction as Dependent Variable)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	0.312	0.168	—	1.857	0.064
Service Quality (SQ)	0.265	0.058	0.232	4.569	< 0.001
Authenticity (AUT)	0.198	0.054	0.185	3.667	< 0.001
Emotional Response (ER)	0.482	0.049	0.510	9.837	< 0.001

The regression results show that all three predictors strongly influence Visitor Satisfaction.

Emotional Response ($\beta = 0.510$, $p < 0.001$) is the strongest predictor, confirming its central role in shaping visitor satisfaction in museum experiences.

Service Quality ($\beta = 0.232$, $p < 0.001$) shows a significant positive effect, indicating that functional aspects of the museum experience contribute meaningfully to satisfaction.

Authenticity ($\beta = 0.185$, $p < 0.001$) also strongly influences satisfaction, illustrating the importance of credible and meaningful historical representation.

The constant term is not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p = 0.064$), which is acceptable in behavioral research models.

5. Discussion

This study examined the effects of Service Quality, Authenticity, and Emotional Response on Visitor Satisfaction in the Museum of Witness and Memory context. The findings provide strong empirical support for the proposed model. The results confirm that Visitor Satisfaction is not exclusively determined by service evaluation, but is strongly determined by emotional and experiential dimensions. Among all predictors, Emotional Response emerged as the most influential factor, followed by Service Quality and Authenticity. This finding adds to the existing literature on tourism and museum experiences by reinforcing the argument that heritage- and memory-based museums operate primarily as affective environments, where emotional engagement plays a central role in shaping visitors' evaluations. This aligns with experience economy theory, which suggests that memorable experiences are driven more by emotions than by functional attributes (Boswijk, A. 2005). The significant positive effect of Service Quality on Visitor Satisfaction confirms that traditional service dimensions remain relevant in museum contexts. Elements such as staff responsiveness, information reliability, and exhibition organization contribute meaningfully to visitor evaluations (Wu, H. C., & Li, T., 2015). However, the relatively lower effect compared to Emotional Response suggests that service quality alone is not sufficient to fully explain satisfaction in emotionally sensitive environments such as museums of witness and memory. Instead, it functions as a supporting mechanism that facilitates deeper emotional and cognitive engagement. Authenticity also demonstrates a significant positive effect on both Emotional Response and Visitor Satisfaction. This supports the idea that visitors highly value credible, truthful, and meaningful historical representation. Importantly, authenticity appears to influence satisfaction both directly and indirectly through emotional response, highlighting its dual role as both a cognitive and experiential driver. The most important finding of this study is the dominant role of Emotional Response in determining Visitor Satisfaction. Emotional engagement—including empathy, sadness, reflection, and personal connection—was the strongest predictor of satisfaction. This result is particularly significant in the context of trauma museums dealing with memory and historical witness. It suggests that visitors do not evaluate their experience primarily based on informational content or service efficiency, but rather on how the experience makes them feel. Thus, Emotional Response functions as a psychological bridge between museum attributes (service quality and authenticity) and overall satisfaction.

The overall model demonstrates that visitor satisfaction is shaped by a multi-layered process:

- *Service Quality provides the functional foundation of the visit.*
- *Authenticity ensures credibility and meaningful narrative framing.*
- *Emotional Response translates these elements into personal experience.*
- *Satisfaction emerges as the final evaluative outcome.*

This structure confirms that museum experiences are not linear but experiential and interpretive, where emotions play a central mediating role. Museums of memory do not merely deliver a cultural service but generate multidimensional value encompassing

educational, social, and societal outcomes. Similar to sustainability-oriented enterprises, value creation extends beyond economic exchange to include social cohesion, identity construction, and community engagement (Dionizi B. and Dhora R. 2025).

6. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

This study investigated the effects of Service Quality, Authenticity, and Emotional Response on Visitor Satisfaction in the Museum of Witness and Memory in Albania. The empirical findings demonstrate that all three constructs significantly influence visitor satisfaction, and Emotional Response is the strongest predictor.

The results confirm that museum visitor experiences are not only driven by functional service characteristics, but are primarily influenced by emotional reactions. Authenticity and Service Quality contribute positively to visitor satisfaction.

Overall, the study supports the view that museums of memory and witness function as experiential and affective environments, where emotional engagement is the key determinant of meaningful visitor experiences. This research makes several contributions to tourism and museum studies literature:

First, it integrates Service Quality, Authenticity, and Emotional Response into a single explanatory framework, offering a more holistic understanding of visitor satisfaction in heritage and memory-based museums.

Second, it empirically confirms the dominant role of Emotional Response, extending experience economy theory by showing that affective engagement outweighs functional evaluation in emotionally sensitive museum contexts.

Third, the study highlights the role of Emotional Response, suggesting that cognitive evaluations (Service Quality and Authenticity) influence satisfaction primarily through emotional pathways. Alsaggaf, M. A., & Althonayan, A. (2018). This strengthens the argument for adopting emotion-centered models in museum experience research.

The findings offer several important implications for museum managers, curators, and policymakers:

Enhancing emotional engagement should be a strategic priority. Museums should design exhibitions that foster empathy, reflection, and emotional immersion rather than focusing only on information delivery.

Authenticity must be preserved and strengthened. Accurate and credible storytelling enhances emotional impact and visitor satisfaction, especially in museums dealing with historical trauma and witness narratives.

Service quality remains essential but supportive. Efficient staff interaction, clear communication, and well-maintained facilities contribute to the overall experience but should be designed to support deeper emotional and interpretive engagement.

Integrated experience design is crucial. Museums should combine narrative authenticity, emotional storytelling, and high service standards to create meaningful and memorable visitor experiences.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

· *First*, the research is based on a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to capture changes in visitor perceptions over time or establish causal relationships with full certainty. *Second*, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias, including social desirability and emotional recall bias, particularly in emotionally sensitive environments such as museums of memory. *Third*, the sample is limited to visitors of a single museum context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other types of museums or cultural heritage sites. *Fourth*, the model focuses on three main predictors (Service Quality, Authenticity, and Emotional Response), while other potentially relevant variables, such as cultural background, prior knowledge, or personal history, and was not included.

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