

The role of cultural entrepreneurship in the economic and social development of Italy's border islands

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Abstract

This study explores the crucial role that cultural entrepreneurship plays in promoting economic and social development on Italy's border islands. Focusing on cases such as Pantelleria, Lampedusa, Salina, Panarea, and Lazaretto, the article analyzes how local businesses leverage cultural heritage, traditional products, and local identities to create sustainable forms of entrepreneurship. By connecting culture with tourism, innovative product development, and social inclusion initiatives, cultural entrepreneurship contributes both to economic prosperity and the preservation of social cohesion. The findings highlight the potential of cultural resources as drivers of development in remote and environmentally sensitive areas, while also providing solutions to challenges related to regional inequality and migration. The study proposes policies and practices that integrate cultural entrepreneurship into the development strategies of border islands to ensure sustainability and promote local identity.

Keywords: Cultural Entrepreneurship; Economic Development; Border Islands; Italy; Social Development

1. Introduction

Cultural entrepreneurship constitutes an essential tool for promoting sustainable development in island and remote regions, where local identity and cultural heritage can serve as key differentiating and competitive elements (Maniou, Mitoula and Manola, 2024). The valorization of local cultural resources through entrepreneurial initiatives enhances the economy while simultaneously preserving cultural identity, as evidenced in Mediterranean island cases, including Pantelleria (Maniou et al., 2024).

Moreover, the connection between cultural entrepreneurship and cultural events, such as literary festivals, fosters local and sustainable development by reinforcing social cohesion and cultural expression (Maniou and Mitoula, 2025). The management of cultural heritage, for example, the conservation of monastic manuscripts and their utilization through cultural tourism, also contributes to the preservation of local history and the enhancement of visitation rates (Maniou et al., 2025).

The prospects for cultural entrepreneurship on border islands such as Imbros and Lesvos underline the importance of capitalizing on each location's unique characteristics to create sustainable business models that support local development (Maniou et al., forthcoming).

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This study aims to investigate the role of cultural entrepreneurship in Italy's border islands, emphasizing the opportunities arising from integrating cultural identity into entrepreneurial activity to promote economic and social development in a sustainable manner.

Concluding the introduction, the Internet, digital technologies, and culture all improve a place's capacity for social and economic development. Both education and digital marketing and entrepreneurship are used to accomplish this. As we wrap up this section, we emphasize the use of digital tools for training in cultural entrepreneurship and in the educational field. Information and communication technology (ICT) makes education easier for everyone, introduces new ways to train teachers effectively, improves knowledge retention, encourages teamwork, makes things more transparent, encourages learner-centered approaches, develops new teaching methods, and speeds up learning. Additionally, through mobility, virtualization, artificial intelligence, and new learning environments, they enhance educational activities and procedures and provide new ways to portray information. In particular, during entrepreneurial education, through a variety of ICT applications [25-29], which are essential to education, and mobile devices [22-24], which allow educational activities to take place anywhere, ICTs have demonstrated their efficacy in enhancing assessment, interventions, and instructional processes. While gaming turns education into a multimodal, captivating, and joyful experience, the use of AI, STEM, and robots [30-33] raises educational processes to new levels of adaptation, innovation, and efficacy. Incorporating and improving ICTs with theories and frameworks of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and the development of emotional intelligence [34-47] also elevates mental capacities in educational processes and policies, which further improves educational practices and results, especially in business and training for aspiring cultural based economy and entrepreneurship.

2. Case studies

2.1. Lampedusa: Cultural Entrepreneurship and Social Transformation

Lampedusa, the southernmost island of Italy, is strategically located in the Mediterranean, just 113 km from the Tunisian coast and 205 km from Sicily. Geographically, it belongs to the African tectonic plate, yet administratively it is part of Italy. The island has gained international recognition as a primary gateway for migratory flows into Europe, a reality that has shaped its social structure and policy priorities (Franceschelli, 2020).

Despite challenges stemming from migration and humanitarian concerns, Lampedusa actively invests in promoting cultural entrepreneurship, seeking to highlight a multidimensional image of the island. The Museum of Trust and Dialogue for the Mediterranean (Museo della Fiducia e del Dialogo nel Mediterraneo) functions as a cultural hub that connects history, art, and society, fostering intercultural dialogue and enhancing cultural tourism (Franceschelli, 2020).

Additionally, Lampedusa in Festival, an international film and cultural festival, focuses on themes such as migration, human rights, and environmental awareness. The festival strengthens social dialogue while also boosting the local economy by attracting artists and visitors (Gravari et al., 2018).

Parallel initiatives in social and creative entrepreneurship include the production of artworks from sea-borne materials, particularly remnants of migrant boats. These actions carry strong cultural and symbolic meaning, linking local creativity to social messages (Boffo and Ricciardi, 2020).

Workshops for youth and children that combine artistic expression with cultural memory further contribute to social cohesion and to building a positive local identity. Through such initiatives, Lampedusa seeks to transform its image, promoting a model of cultural entrepreneurship that blends social inclusion, cultural valorization, and sustainable development (Franceschelli, 2020; Boffo and Ricciardi, 2020).

2.2. Pantelleria: Preserving Agricultural Tradition and Intangible Cultural Heritage

Pantelleria, known as the "Black Pearl of the Mediterranean" due to its volcanic origin, is one of Italy's southernmost islands, located between Sicily and Tunisia. Although administratively part of Sicily, it maintains a distinct geomorphological, cultural, and agricultural character that sets it apart within Italy. Its relative isolation and the absence of mass tourism have contributed to preserving the island's authenticity and fostering a unique form of agro-cultural entrepreneurship.

A central feature of Pantelleria's cultural heritage is the traditional cultivation of vineyards in dry-stone terraces on its volcanic, wind-swept landscape. This method, focusing on the cultivation of the Zibibbo grape, was recognized by

UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2014, underscoring its importance for safeguarding local cultural practices (UNESCO, 2014).

The production of the sweet wine "Passito di Pantelleria" lies at the core of the local economy and cultural entrepreneurship, blending traditional winemaking techniques with modern marketing approaches. This combination of heritage and innovation promotes agro-tourism, gastronomy, and local cultural identity (D'Ascanio, 2021).

Many wineries and farms have evolved into cultural centers, offering wine tastings, vineyard tours, and educational programs that transmit local techniques to younger generations. At the same time, the restoration of traditional stone houses known as *dammusi*, with their characteristic domed roofs, has transformed them into cultural accommodation units, supporting a sustainable development model that respects the island's landscape and history (Galt and Galt, 1978).

Pantelleria's entrepreneurship integrates strong environmental awareness and the preservation of local identity. The Pantelleria National Park covers about 80% of the island, and collaboration with local eco-cooperatives promotes a soft development model where local knowledge and cultural memory are central to economic activity (D'Ascanio, 2021).

This holistic approach has made Pantelleria a benchmark of agro-cultural entrepreneurship, fostering sustainable development while highlighting the island's uniqueness and strengthening the local economy.

2.3. Salina: Cultural Entrepreneurship and Identity Tourism

Salina, part of the Aeolian Islands archipelago in Sicily, stands out for its striking natural beauty and rich cultural character. Despite its small size, the island has developed strong cultural entrepreneurship based on local festivals, documentary production, and a sustainable identity tourism model.

Documentary filmmaking constitutes an important axis of Salina's cultural life. The annual SalinaDocFest, an international documentary festival, promotes the local cultural identity and environmental preservation. The films presented highlight the stories of residents and their relationship with nature, fostering dialogue and cultural exchange (Gravari-Barbas and Jacquot, 2018).

Salina also hosts several cultural festivals showcasing local traditions, music, and gastronomy. The Festa della Malvasia, dedicated to the famous local Malvasia wine, bridges agricultural production with cultural expression. These festivals support the local economy, create networks of cooperation, and enhance cultural pride (Satta, Parola and Penco, 2014).

The island adopts an identity tourism model targeting visitors seeking authentic experiences rooted in local culture, nature, and lifestyle. This sustainable tourism is based on respect for the environment and local community, promoting cultural heritage trails, hiking routes, and participatory activities that deepen engagement with local values (Duxbury and Richards, 2019).

The emphasis on local identity and the integration of authentic cultural elements into tourism create opportunities for small businesses and foster a development model that respects and protects the island.

2.4. Panarea: Cultural Entrepreneurship and Environmental Innovation

Panarea, a small Aeolian Island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, is distinguished by its unique natural and cultural environment. The island combines traditional ways of life with modern approaches to sustainable development, particularly in cultural entrepreneurship and marine biotechnology.

One of Panarea's most innovative aspects involves research and development in marine biotechnology. Studies such as those by Spanò et al. (2013) have isolated specific bacteria that produce biopolymers (EPS) from the island's submarine volcanic environments, opening up new applications in ecological management and materials science.

At the same time, Panarea preserves its traditional architecture, especially through the *dammusi*—stone-built houses with distinctive domed roofs. These structures not only represent cultural heritage but also promote a sustainable architectural model harmonized with the island's natural environment and climate (Culoma, 2019).

Cultural entrepreneurship in Panarea elevates the island beyond its natural beauty through initiatives combining cultural identity, environmental protection, and sustainable tourism development. The promotion of local heritage,

organization of cultural events, and support of ecological initiatives contribute to creating an integrated model of local development.

2.5. Lazzaretto Vecchio (Venice): From Quarantine Station to Cultural Centre

Lazzaretto Vecchio, located in the Venetian lagoon, is one of the oldest examples of quarantine islands in Europe. Established in the 15th century as an isolation site for patients during plague epidemics, it served for centuries as a strategic point for safeguarding Venice's commercial network (Calabi, 2004). Its location, situated along key maritime trade routes, made it ideal for controlling and quarantining ships and goods entering the city. The island possesses a rich historical heritage, with buildings that combine military and religious architectural elements. Recent archaeological excavations have uncovered human remains and artefacts that shed light on the plagues of the Renaissance period (Rossi et al., 2013). This sanitary history has been reinterpreted within the framework of cultural heritage and is currently used as a tool for historical memory and education.

In recent years, Lazzaretto Vecchio has been undergoing a gradual transformation into a museum and cultural venue, aimed at highlighting the history of quarantine practices and Venice's epidemic management. Initiatives include:

- The creation of museum routes narrating the history of public health and trade in Venice.
- Cultural festivals and events that utilize the island's distinctive atmosphere for theatrical performances and artistic installations.
- Collaborations with research centers and universities to promote archaeological findings and develop educational programs for visitors and students.

This adaptive reuse combines cultural heritage tourism with innovative storytelling practices, serving as an example of integrating "difficult heritage" into contemporary models of cultural entrepreneurship (Gravari-Barbas and Jacquot, 2018). The valorization of Lazzaretto Vecchio forms part of Venice's broader sustainable tourism strategies, aiming to relieve pressure on the historic center and promote lesser-known sites in the lagoon. This contributes to decentralizing tourist activity and strengthening the local economy through specialized thematic visits. (Table 1)

Table 1 Comparative Table

Island	Geographic Location	Key Cultural Features	Type of Cultural Entrepreneurship	UNESCO / International Recognition
Lampedusa	Southern Italy, near Tunisia	Migration Museum Lampedusain-Festival	Social and creative entrepreneurship	Humanitarian narrative — cultural tourism
Pantelleria	Southwestern Sicily	Zibibbo grape cultivation dammusi architectura	Agrocultural entrepreneurship, gastronomy	UNESCO Intangible Heritage (2014, 2018)
Panarea	Aeolian Islands	SalinaDocFest, Festa della Malvasia	Cultural tourism, festivals and wine tourism	Promotion of sustainable local identity
Lazzaretto Vecchio (Venice)	Venetian Lagoon	Underwater hydrothermal vents, local arts	Marine biotechnology and cultural tourism	Internationally recognized scientific research Internationally sustained tourism strategy

3. Analytical overall evaluation

Cultural entrepreneurship emerges as a key development tool for the local communities of the Mediterranean's peripheral islands, offering opportunities to diversify their economic base through the valorization of cultural heritage and endogenous resources. By adopting innovative business models rooted in local identity and tradition, island

societies manage to highlight unique competitive advantages and promote forms of tourism that underpin sustainable development.

Beyond its economic dimension, cultural entrepreneurship reinforces social cohesion and encourages the active participation of residents in actions aimed at preserving and promoting their cultural heritage. The creation of collaborative schemes and networks among local actors, entrepreneurs, and governance institutions acts as a catalyst for the success and long-term sustainability of these initiatives.

Nevertheless, the implementation of cultural entrepreneurship on these islands is not without challenges. In some cases, such as Lampedusa — which faces intense migratory flows — the social dynamics become complex, requiring particular sensitivity in planning initiatives to prevent tensions or social exclusion. Moreover, the authenticity of cultural heritage faces threats of over-commercialization and the introduction of unsustainable development models that risk altering the character of local communities (Maniou et al., 2025b).

On an environmental level, increasing tourism pressure and the impacts of climate change represent significant threats to the natural and cultural ecosystems of these islands. The integration of environmental sustainability principles and adaptive management is therefore essential to ensure the resilience of communities and the preservation of their cultural practices.

Finally, the success and sustainability of cultural entrepreneurship initiatives largely depend on supportive policies and institutional frameworks. Strengthening local stakeholders, enhancing interregional cooperation, and adopting flexible governance models that recognize the particularities of remote islands are crucial prerequisites for successfully implementing these strategies.

Overall, cultural entrepreneurship can serve as a lever for positive social, economic, and environmental transformations in Mediterranean islands, provided that it develops with vision, responsibility, and an emphasis on local community participation (Maniou et al., 2025a).

4. Conclusion

This study highlighted the significance of cultural entrepreneurship as a key instrument for the sustainable development of peripheral Mediterranean islands, focusing on the Italian islands of Lampedusa, Pantelleria, Salina, and Panarea. Through comparative analysis, it was demonstrated that the valorization of local cultural heritage — both tangible and intangible — substantially contributes to community empowerment, the promotion of cultural tourism, and the preservation of local identity.

At the same time, the research emphasized the need for careful management of the social, economic, and environmental challenges accompanying this development. The sustainability of cultural entrepreneurship initiatives depends on local stakeholders' involvement, governance support, and the integration of innovative approaches that merge tradition with contemporary needs.

The study contributes to the theoretical and empirical understanding of cultural entrepreneurship in small island environments and underscores the potential to develop models applicable to other peripheral areas with similar characteristics.

Finally, further research is recommended to explore the social impacts of cultural entrepreneurship empirically and to investigate new technologies and digital tools that could enhance the visibility and sustainability of local initiatives.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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