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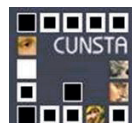
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The role of digital technologies for culture-driven local development in Europe: A policy review

Paola Beccherle*, Luciana
Lazzeretti**

Abstract

The use of new technologies in the digital age has transformed the ways of producing, preserving, and participating in the cultural heritage of the territories. Consequently, the culture-driven approach to local development takes on a hybrid dimension, where culture, local and digital development interrelate in physical and digital spaces. The research aims to identify the themes in which the EU's policies for cultural heritage, local development, and digital transformation meet to understand the areas in which the use of new technological applications for culture-driven local development is supported in Europe. To do that, a qualitative investigation of policies was conducted using NVivo 14. The results show that the EU policies recognize the importance of enhancing the local tourist experience through digital cultural content, the digital preservation of the local cultural heritage, and the participation in cultural heritage in the digital space.

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L'utilizzo delle nuove tecnologie nell'era digitale ha trasformato i modi di produrre, conservare e partecipare il patrimonio culturale dei territori. Conseguentemente, l'approccio *culture-driven* allo sviluppo locale assume una dimensione ibrida, in cui cultura, sviluppo locale e digitale si interrelazionano sia nello spazio fisico sia in quello digitale. L'obiettivo della ricerca è di identificare i temi in cui le politiche per il patrimonio culturale, per lo sviluppo locale e per la trasformazione digitale dell'UE si incontrano, al fine di comprendere gli ambiti in cui l'utilizzo delle nuove tecnologie per lo sviluppo locale a base culturale è sostenuto in Europa. Per fare ciò, è stata condotta un'indagine qualitativa delle politiche utilizzando NVivo 14. I risultati mostrano che le politiche dell'UE riconoscono l'importanza del miglioramento dell'esperienza turistica locale attraverso contenuti culturali digitali, della conservazione digitale del patrimonio culturale locale, e della partecipazione al patrimonio culturale nello spazio digitale.

1. *The role of digital technologies for culture-driven local development*

The regional and cultural economics literature associates cultural heritage (CH) with direct and indirect beneficial effects on the economy and society¹ in several ways: by making territories more attractive², reinforcing the sense of local belonging and territorial soft power³, supporting the generation and maintenance of the local social capital⁴, and above all by contributing to local economic development by stimulating creativity⁵ and territorial identity⁶.

CH, representing the values and history of the local community, is a determinant for local development. According to the local development theory adopted in the present research, local development refers to «a particular form of regional development in which endogenous or local factors play a principal role»⁷. In particular, it aims to «identify the genetic local conditions which determine the competitiveness of a local production system and ensure its persistence over time»⁸. The term “local” refers to a regional or sub-regional territorial unit⁹. Local development is specifically intended as the realization of the territorial capital¹⁰, which is «the set of territorial assets – material and immaterial, public and private, cognitive and relational – that generates endogenous development»¹¹. The local development theory has recognized CH as one of

¹ Sacco *et al.* 2018.

² Florida 2007; Cooke, Lazzarretti 2008.

³ Grincheva 2020.

⁴ Murzyn-Kupisz, Dziasek 2013.

⁵ Lazzarretti 2009; Cerisola 2019.

⁶ Panzera 2022.

⁷ Coffey, Polèse 1985, p. 86.

⁸ Capello 2011, p. 14.

⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰ Camagni, Capello 2013.

¹¹ Camagni *et al.* 2020, p. 34.

the territorial capital's elements¹². In this scenario, the so-called culture-led development does not imply only a direct economic development that arises from the CH, but the creation of the social and economic conditions to trigger the powers of culture¹³. Consequently, conservation, valorization, and participation in CH are considered effective strategies for supporting local economic, cultural and social development.

In addition to the literature on this issue, European policies have increasingly recognized how much CH matters for local development¹⁴. The first recognition of CH by the EU as a resource for territorial development was by the European Commission in 1999¹⁵. In 2018, the European Year of Cultural Heritage¹⁶ consolidated CH as an area that can contribute to multiple sectors by offering perspectives shared to address various global challenges.

CH, as defined by the European Commission (EC), is a set of

cultural and creative resources of a tangible or intangible nature, with a value for society that has been publicly recognized to preserve it for future generations. It includes natural, built, and archaeological sites, museums, monuments, artworks, historic cities, literary, musical, audiovisual and digital works, and the knowledge, practices and traditions of European citizens¹⁷.

Parallel to the process that led the academia and European policymakers to the recognition of the contribution of CH to local development, the digital revolution has brought radical changes to the economy and society, leading to unprecedented economies and ways of living. As a result, physical and digital realities are converging, and the concept of territory has become multi-dimensional. The territories – and their CH – gradually are taking on a digital dimension, superimposed as an information layer on the physical one¹⁸. For this reason, the most recent definitions of CH provided by the EC (2017) and UNESCO (2009) include digital CH materials, i.e., digitized or digital-born CH.

The digital transformation of territories and CH has been accelerated by the lockdowns following the COVID-19 pandemic, making digital media the only channel to reach people confined to home. This crisis significantly changed people's and cultural institutions' perceptions of digital technologies, revealing existing problems and accelerating changes that had already begun¹⁹. As highlighted by Silberman (2020), the pandemic has transformed the social role of

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Della Torre 2010; Sacco *et al.* 2014.

¹⁴ CSES 2010.

¹⁵ EC 1999.

¹⁶ European Parliament, Council of the EU 2017.

¹⁷ EC 2017, p. 1.

¹⁸ de Souza Silva 2006; Papangelis *et al.* 2020.

¹⁹ Sokolovskiy *et al.* 2023.

CH in the coming decades²⁰: from the conservation of the physical dimension of the CH to the conservation of the intangible aspects related to it; from the recognition of the CH of “universal value” to the recognition of the value of the local memories; from passive participation to active participatory processes to CH.

The EU has reacted to the pandemic by arranging ad hoc tools and actions. The Recovery and Resilience Facility (2021-2026) recognized the devastating effects on CH. At the same time, it states that the «Covid-19 crisis has accelerated the digital transformation and technological developments»²¹. Similarly, the Digital Europe Work Programme (2021-2022) cites how «the COVID-19 crisis has further highlighted the critical role of digital technologies and infrastructures in our lives and demonstrated how our societies and economies rely on digital solutions. Moreover, it has accelerated the digital transition»²². For this reason, the program has prepared the creation of a European Data Space for Cultural Heritage to «reinforce storytelling, building narratives with a European perspective across cultural sectors, regional and national borders»²³. Along the same lines, the Work Plan for Culture (2023-2026) prepared the creation of the Collaborative Cloud on Cultural Heritage to better respond to emergencies by guaranteeing the sustainability of CH²⁴.

As digital technologies radically changed the experience, exploitation, and methods of preserving CH, the scientific community is beginning to wonder what are and can be the effects of the digital transformation of the CH sector, highlighting the opportunities and risks that arise from them.

Digital technologies can help preserve and conserve the CH, which risks getting lost due to its physical nature²⁵. 2D and 3D technologies and the creation of virtual reality (VR) environments are considered by practitioners and academics to make digital heritage accessible for conservation purposes through online platforms. On the other hand, there is a latent risk of the commodification of the digital cultural content²⁶, of memory loss due to the decision to digitize only CH judged to have a high symbolic value, and of using algorithms in processing the information collected on the web which can hide bias and errors²⁷.

The literature underlines how using social media and online communities for the promotion and enhancement of CH contributes to its reputation, visi-

²⁰ Silberman 2020.

²¹ EC 2022a, p. 2.

²² EC 2021a, p. 2.

²³ EC 2021a, p. 57.

²⁴ Council of the EU 2022.

²⁵ Acke *et al.* 2021.

²⁶ Martin 2008.

²⁷ Lazzarotti 2022.

bility, and attraction for tourism²⁸. However, some contributions in the literature highlight the risks of inequalities of recognition. In particular, between those CH assets that receive a surplus of attention because of their “celebrity” and those considered minors who do not receive enough recognition²⁹.

One theme that stands out more than others in the recent literature is the unprecedented ways digital technologies open for CH participation through augmented reality (AR) and VR applications³⁰, video games³¹, and digital platforms. On online platforms, such as social networks, local communities can share their CH by telling it in the first person. In these online social spaces, multiple territorial actors – institutional, cultural, economic, but above all civil – co-produce representations of places and communities. In this way, cultural participation is rooted in the commitment and activism to conserving, protecting, and enhancing territorial CH. At the same time, however, such technologies can create digital gaps and exclusions of groups of people, such as those with a disability, or potentially contribute through customized algorithms to greater social fragmentation by reinforcing group stereotypes³².

As for culture-led local development, academic literature and the EU have moved since the early 00s to try to understand the opportunities of new technologies for CH. However, the CH digitization theme only recently has been addressed by considering its territorial dimension³³.

Public policies, being created as a «response to policy demands, or those claim for action or inaction on some public issues made by other actors – private citizens, group representatives, or legislators and other public officials – upon government officials and agencies»³⁴, can be a significant object of analysis to understand the most felt issues on a given theme and area. In addition, the funding programs that stem from public policies are an important incentive to invest in the issues outlined by the policies, contributing to driving the actions of organizations and local authorities.

As highlighted, on the one hand, some studies focus on the role of CH in policies for regional and urban development³⁵, and on the other hand, on policies for new technologies and innovation. Among the most significant in the latter case, Panezi (2018) investigated European cultural and digital policies, focusing on copyright legislation. Donato (2021), on the other hand, has investigated the policies for culture in research policies, also discussing the CH

²⁸ Riganti, Nijkamp 2006.

²⁹ Lazzeretti 2022.

³⁰ Tscheu, Buhalis 2016; Bekele *et al.* 2018.

³¹ Solima 2020.

³² Kulesz 2020.

³³ Sedita, Ozeki 2022.

³⁴ Anderson 2003, p. 1.

³⁵ Cerisola 2019; Borin, Donato 2020.

digital innovation. Finally, Münster *et al.* (2021) investigated European policies for culture and digital by testing different analysis methodologies.

Despite some efforts to investigate European policies for culture and digital, the literature contributions have not included the local dimension, just as the contributions on culture-led local development have rarely included the digital dimension. In the literature, there is no simultaneous analysis of the interrelations of European cultural, local development and digital policies to outline the role of new technological applications to CH for local development.

The local development theory point of view is particularly relevant to study the digital transformation of CH for three subsequent reasons. The first reason concerns the intrinsic local nature of CH. The second one regards the strategic role of territories and their communities in preserving, conserving, and enhancing the diversity of cultural expressions in the digital age. The last reason regards the exploration of the relationships between the endogenous local development determinant “cultural heritage” and the exogenous variable represented by digital technologies.

2. *Research design and methodology*

Starting from the methodologies used in the economics literature to analyze European policies, the policy context in which cultural organizations and local authorities operate in their digital transformation was investigated through a policy analysis via a thematic inquiry³⁶.

In particular, the content analysis method³⁷ was applied to European policies such as EU regulations, directives, decisions, recommendations, and opinions but also communications, programs, and initiatives for cultural heritage, local development, and digital technologies published by the EC, the European Council and the European Parliament on their institutional websites.

The policy documents were selected following the principle of authority and high relevance from the EU’s official website “www.eur-lex.europa.eu” between 2005 and 2023. The year 2005 was chosen as a starting date for the research as two key documents were published that year: the UNESCO Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions³⁸ and the Faro Convention³⁹ promoted by the European Council. Europe is part of the UNESCO Convention, an international treaty that provides a political framework for the governance of Culture. The UNESCO Convention recognizes the distinctive nature

³⁶ Münster *et al.* 2021.

³⁷ Krippendorff 2013.

³⁸ UNESCO 2005.

³⁹ Council of Europe 2005.

of Culture as an essential contribution to economic and social development. On the other hand, the Faro Convention encourages the protection of CH as a central element of mutually reinforcing objectives: sustainable development, cultural diversity, and contemporary creativity. The two conventions were decisive in formulating the following European cultural policies.

The website www.eur-lex.europa.eu collects the legal acts adopted by the EU, which are presented by theme in the “Summary of EU legislation” section. This procedure was chosen because it was possible to directly access «the main legal acts passed by the EU»⁴⁰, allowing to follow the chosen principle of authority and high relevance for selection.

As the three dimensions taken into consideration for the present research are cultural heritage, local development and digital technologies, the documents relating to the three themes corresponding to the homonymous sections of the website were analyzed: “Culture”, “Regional policy” and “Digital single market”. The “Culture” section was chosen because it is dedicated to cultural policies and programs, including those for CH. The “Regional policy” section was selected because it contains the policy devoted to tackling local development issues, addressed significantly in the literature on local development to which the present research aims to contribute⁴¹. Finally, the “Digital Single Market” section was chosen as it collects the EU rules and programs to adapt the European single market to the digital age by considering multiple economic sectors, including the CH one. The types of documents taken into consideration varied, as not only policy frameworks were analyzed but also programs and initiatives supporting such policies. This is because the research aimed to understand how and if the EU policies’ guidelines are supported by practical actions and resources to underpin their application. This information can suggest the effective relevance given by policymakers to the policy guidelines, according to the principle that if investments – both in monetary and in time terms – had been assigned, the policy guidelines would have been particularly felt by the EU and influential for the territories.

The analysis used in-depth coding research with NVivo 14 qualitative text analysis software⁴². NVivo, designed by the sociologist Tom Richards and the computer scientist Lynn Richards for social science research⁴³, is one of the most used and updated software programs to perform Computer Assisted

⁴⁰ EU, Summaries of EU legislation, <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/browse/summaries.html>>, 28.03.2023.

⁴¹ «The EU cohesion and regional policy strengthens economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU Member States and regions by supporting job creation, competitiveness, economic growth, improved quality of life and green and digital transition» (EU, Summaries of EU legislation: Regional Policy, <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/chapter/26.html>>, 25.07.2023).

⁴² Hay, Smith 2005.

⁴³ Richards, Richards 2003.

Qualitative Data Analysis⁴⁴. It facilitates the identification and comparison of relationships in the data⁴⁵, and it is particularly useful to make subjective textual exploration⁴⁶ more efficient⁴⁷, systematic and transparent.

The process of analysis with NVivo consisted mainly of three steps.

The first consisted of fully reading and manually encoding the most relevant policy texts for CH, local development, and digital technologies. The initial database consisted of 71 documents, retrieved from the section “Culture”, “Regional policy” and “Digital single market” on the EUR-Lex.europa.eu website. Then, the database has been cleaned up, maintaining only the documents that contextually consider CH, the application of digital technologies, and the territorial dimension. The final database comprises 22 documents, which can be consulted in Annex A. The parts of the texts in which the policies explicitly mention at the same time CH, the territorial dimension, and the application of digital technologies were classified into themes. The themes that emerged from the integral reading of the documents were manually named and encoded. It is possible to consult a screenshot of the software interface in Annex B.

Secondly, NVivo’s Matrix Coding Query was used. It allows combining a search in rows and columns. For example, the matrix can be used to cross the policy documents’ area on the one hand, i.e., policies for culture, regional policy and policy for the digital single market, and on the other, the percentage of presence of the encoded themes per policy area. This tool can provide helpful information to get an overview of the emphasis on the themes that emerged from the different policy areas or in different years taken into consideration.

The last step consisted in analyzing the hotspots and critical issues of the themes encoded through a word frequency query. To do this, the citations in the European policy documents that refer to the emerging themes, which are in the form of sentences, were automatically collected by the software in a single document. The word frequency analysis was performed on that document. In this phase, the themes have been analyzed, transcending the areas of competence of European policies to have a general vision of the words that emerged in EU policies. The results of the word frequency query were then visualized through word frequency tables and related word clouds.

In this last analysis, the words “Culture”, “Heritage”, “Europe” and “European” were classified as stop words and so not considered because they were recurrent and not significant to understand the themes that gravitate around the concept of CH.

⁴⁴ Mortelmans 2019.

⁴⁵ Maher *et al.* 2018; Hutchison *et al.* 2010.

⁴⁶ Krippendorff 2013.

⁴⁷ Robins, Eisen 2017.

European policies for culture also include policies for contemporary creativity and cultural and creative industries. The present research focuses on the European policies for CH, avoiding including the policies for creativity or cultural and creative industries because they constitute a different analysis field in the regional and cultural economics literature.

Another research boundary concerns the exclusion of policies for libraries, as the present research is included in a research project investigating the role of museums and digital technologies in cities.

Furthermore, as the present research aims to outline the specific themes that guide the action of cultural organizations and local authorities without requiring further subjective interpretations from these actors, only the policy documents contextually mentioning CH, local development, and the use of digital technologies were considered.

3. The most relevant themes emerged from the analysis of the EU policies for cultural heritage, local development and digital technologies

From the analysis of the interrelationships of European policies for CH, local development and digital transformation, the main themes that emerged are: the enhancement of the local tourist experience through digital CH content, the digital preservation of the local CH, and the importance of the participation in CH in the digital space.

The different policy areas, i.e., policy for culture, regional policy and policy for digital transformation, gave importance to the three themes that emerged in different ways. The policies that have most dedicated themselves to applying digital technologies to cultural heritage for local development have been the policies for digital transformation. They focused, in particular, on the digital preservation of the local cultural heritage. Cultural policies have placed greater emphasis on participation in CH in the digital space. In contrast, local development policies have on the enhancement of the tourist experience through local digital CH content. The degree of percentage coverage of the different topics in the policy areas considered can be consulted in Table 1, a matrix coding query generated with NVivo 14. The table presents the percentage in columns of the three themes that emerged concerning the three policy areas.

Policy Area	Enhancement of the tourist experience through digital local cultural heritage content	Digital preservation of the local cultural heritage	Participation in cultural heritage in the digital space
Policies for Cultural Heritage	18.09%	10.23%	25.55%
Policies for Local Development	36.14%	2.6%	25.55%
Policies for Digital Transformation	45.77%	87.18%	48.89%

Tab. 1. Matrix Coding Query of the policy areas and the themes encoded calculated on column percentage (Source: Authors' elaboration)

3.1. *The enhancement of the tourist experience through digital local cultural heritage content*

The first theme that emerged is the reuse of digitized local CH content to enhance and promote the tourism experience.

Among the EU policy for CH, the New Agenda for Culture (2018) was the first to focus on the importance of the engagement of cities and regions «in order to create supportive environments for culture-led innovation»⁴⁸. The Agenda highlighted the need to combine knowledge and skills specific to cultural and creative sectors with those of other sectors to generate innovative solutions such as Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and tourism. Along this line, the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage (2019)⁴⁹ stimulates the reuse of digitized CH content for tourism purposes to better protect, enhance and promote the local CH. The same document establishes the European Capital of Smart Tourism, an award with four categories, one of which is digitization.

Local development policies devote significant space to enhance the tourist experience through digital CH content. From the planning 2014-2020 of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)⁵⁰, the EU underpinned the idea that CH can support sustainable tourism, also through the use of ICT, and that it should be part of the territorial strategy. Within the ERDF programming (2014-2020), the Interreg initiative recognizes that «cultural heritage is at the heart of who we are. It surrounds us in the buildings of our cities

⁴⁸ EC 2018, p. 4.

⁴⁹ EC 2019.

⁵⁰ European Parliament, Council of the EU 2013.

and towns»⁵¹ and that the program encourages the use of «innovative digital solutions like virtual reality to make culture more attractive particularly for young people»⁵².

Maintaining the direction traced by the ERDF 2014-2020, the new programming (2021-2027) draws attention to the investments in infrastructure, including cultural heritage and tourism, with a particular focus on ICT⁵³. To do this, it aims at «ensuring the involvement of regional, local, urban and other public authorities»⁵⁴.

The Urban Agenda for the EU focuses on digitalizing CH to enhance the tourist experience and balance tourist flows, promoting less visited sites and cities.

On the one hand, the Agenda encourages the use of digitized cultural content to improve the tourist experience onsite. In this regard, it highlights the need for the «creation of cultural routes (cultural, heritage, etc.) with their respective narration/storytelling and a process of continuous improvement of the Culture and heritage offer, optimising the urban-rural link»⁵⁵ using «IT tools for visitor's flow orientation/management allowing the enjoyment of Cultural Heritage while contributing to guarantee a safe and sustainable user experience through push notifications»⁵⁶. Therefore, digital technologies are considered helpful for educational purposes and cultural enhancement and to make tourism in cities more sustainable.

On the other hand, the Agenda stimulates the «promotion of the use of cultural contents also online (e.g., virtual tours)»⁵⁷, and therefore the creation of «remote cultural offers»⁵⁸. The Agenda does not refer only to services for tourists, but calls for the involvement of locals in the narration of their own CH «producing audio-visual and digital programs involving the population, organizing discovery visits run by local inhabitants and heritage professionals, encouraging locals to share interesting content about their city on social media»⁵⁹. Finally, among the local development policies, it is worth mentioning the Recovery and Resilience Facility (2021-2026) that, although each European country then declines it with respect to their national programs, encourages the «protection, development and promotion of cultural heritage and cultural services»⁶⁰, also through the use of digital technologies. In particular, the Recovery and Resilience Fund Culture and Creativity Scoreboard (2021-2026), a

⁵¹ Interact, EC 2018, p. 7.

⁵² Interact, EC 2018, p. 6.

⁵³ European Parliament, Council of the EU 2021a, p. 7.

⁵⁴ European Parliament, Council of the EU 2021a, p. 2.

⁵⁵ EC 2020a, p. 43.

⁵⁶ EC 2020a, p. 74.

⁵⁷ EC 2020a, p. 76.

⁵⁸ EC 2020a, p. 40.

⁵⁹ EC 2020a, p. 131.

⁶⁰ European Parliament, Council of the EU 2021b, p. 55.

document explicitly dedicated to the CH sector, aims to stimulate the creation of digital cultural content to promote tourist itineraries for the development of sustainable tourism, supporting the revitalization and modernization of CH. It prompts the «creation and production of cultural content, fostering cultural tourism and increasing the attractiveness of the territories [...] establishing cultural routes at emblematic archaeological sites and monuments [...], increasing attractiveness of small historic towns»⁶¹.

Concerning policies promoting digital transformation, the Commission's Recommendation on a common European data space for cultural heritage (2021)⁶² stimulates the reuse of digitized CH content for tourism in the European regions. The document recognizes that the reuse of cultural content can generate new jobs in the CH sector, improve the tourist experience and make tourism more sustainable, including in smart cities. It acknowledges that the digitized content should include buildings, monuments, cultural sites, and intangible CH. Following these indications, the Digital Europe Programme (2021-2027) aims to build the Data space for cultural heritage to stimulate the «development of innovative applications and reuse in the cultural and creative sectors as well as in other areas such as tourism»⁶³, underlying the «numerous digital opportunities for the public, ranging from virtual visits to museums, libraries, galleries, and heritage sites to history reconstruction and education»⁶⁴. The following Digital Europe Work Programme 2023-2024 operationalizes the plan, deploying the data space with 3D and Extended reality content, fostering the reuse of digitized CH resources in the tourism domain⁶⁵. The close collaboration of the territories is reiterated, as «the development of the data space will include [the] [...] creation or consolidation of links with other data space at European, national, or local level»⁶⁶. The cultural heritage-tourism link will be strengthened in the program, as «the data space for tourism will be closely connected to other sectoral data spaces, such as the data space for cultural heritage»⁶⁷.

Along the same line, Horizon Europe (2021-2024) has prepared numerous calls to digitally enhance local CH for the tourist experience in the territories. In particular, the Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023-2024 focuses on «fostering socio-economic development and job creation in rural and remote areas through cultural tourism»⁶⁸ to bring «benefits to local communities, foster sustainable development, job creation and social inclusion, by promoting the

⁶¹ EC 2022b, p. 5.

⁶² EC 2021b.

⁶³ EC 2021a, p. 57.

⁶⁴ EC 2021a, p. 58.

⁶⁵ EC 2023, p. 34-35.

⁶⁶ EC 2023, p. 51.

⁶⁷ EC 2023, p. 35.

⁶⁸ EC 2020a, p. 69.

indigenous cultural history and culture (with its traditions, arts and craft)»⁶⁹. To do this, the call requires collecting recommendations, methodologies, and good practices in the cultural tourism field to improve the territories' policies. In support of this goal, «solutions that would include the use of digital technologies to promote less touristic and remote destinations are welcome» promoting «the local identity, arts and crafts by engaging tourists with the creative process»⁷⁰.

In Figure 1, it is possible to visualize the Word Cloud of the Most Frequent Words in policy texts mentioning the importance of enhancement of the local tourist experience through digital CH content that is: tourism, digital, development, promoting, digitized, technologies, experience, data, touristic, offer, culture, assets, enhance, local, innovative, space, regions.



Fig. 1. Word Cloud of the Most Frequent Words in policy texts mentioning the importance of the enhancement of the tourist experience through digital local cultural heritage content

3.2. *The digital preservation of the local cultural heritage*

Several policies and programs emphasize the importance of the digital preservation of the local CH.

Among the European policies for culture, the Work Plan for Culture (2023-2026) mentions the possibility of using online platforms to exchange information and experiences on the protection of CH, supporting cooperation at all levels, including at a regional and local level⁷¹.

⁶⁹ EC 2020a, p. 70.

⁷⁰ EC 2022c, p. 71.

⁷¹ Council of the EU 2022.

Regarding the policy for local development, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (2020-2026) stimulated investments in digital technologies, including for the preservation of CH, by investing in the development of dedicated cloud and software infrastructures for digital CH content. Digitization for preservation and conservation purposes sees the digital CH materials reused to give access to public archives and disseminate them, combining the preservation and enhancement functions⁷². In this case, the strictly regional and territorial dimension is less immediate, as it is mediated by the member states' recovery and resilience plans adopted at the national level. Still, they benefit the territories by making funds available for economic, social and cultural development.

Within the policies dedicated to digitalizing cultural heritage, the Horizon 2020 program has always encouraged projects for conserving CH through digital technologies.

In particular, the Horizon 2020 Work Plan (2018-2020) involved the construction of a social platform on the impact assessment and the quality of interventions in the European historical environment and CH sites, and the foundation of a Competence Centre for the preservation and conservation of Monuments and Sites. The latter have been predisposed «aiming at the preservation and conservation of European Cultural Heritage using new state-of-the-art ICT technologies»⁷³, in which local authorities actively participate. The technologies on which the Competence Center wants to focus are 3D modeling, a cloud space for CH, data collection through sensors, VR, semantic tools and, above all, the formulation of standards on CH data sharing for knowledge transfer purposes. The Competence Center for the Conservation of Cultural Heritage is also composed of competence communities spread across the EU territories. In particular, they are made up of local, metropolitan and regional entities that collaborate by collecting and sharing best practices, skills and experiences regarding their CH management, and information on public needs, critical issues and threats regarding CH⁷⁴.

Giving continuity to the direction taken, the strategic plan of Horizon Europe following programming (2021-2027) emphasizes the potential of CH «as a driver of sustainable innovation and a European sense of belonging [...] realised [...] through better protection, restoration and promotion of cultural heritage»⁷⁵. Continuous engagement is made possible through international cooperation, which allows the EU member states to benefit from a better assessment of the challenges in the global, regional and local context⁷⁶. Following the strategic plan, the Horizon Europe Work Programme for 2021

⁷² EC 2022c.

⁷³ EC 2020b, p. 54.

⁷⁴ Longo *et al.* 2021.

⁷⁵ EC 2021a, p. 46.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem.*

and 2022 called for implementing conservation and restoration technologies and methods to preserve monuments and artifacts. This purpose is supposed to be achieved through the cooperation and participation of a wide range of community actors, including local, regional and national authorities, particularly in the uptake and implementation of research results and recommendations. For the Horizon Europe Work Programme, CH should be made resilient through digital technological applications, considering the «interconnection between virtual and physical spaces [...] including with a view to the emerging concept of “hybrid environment”»⁷⁷. In the following Horizon Europe Work Programme (2023-2024), there is a specific call for implementing advanced technologies for remote monitoring of heritage monuments and artifacts. Sensors, interferometric and photoacoustic technologies are considered to help systematically monitor the structural integrity of monuments, buildings and artifacts, controlling their environmental conditions. The program establishes the creation of a European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage, a collaborative platform for the recovery and conservation of the CH. It is supported by stakeholders not only at the European and national, but also at regional and local levels, providing services for regional and local CH institutions. A digital ecosystem that will lead to «new realms of research, knowledge and creation of societal value» through a «new generation of multidimensional, interconnected and knowledge-enhanced heritage data forming digital commons»⁷⁸. Finally, the Horizon Europe 2023-2024 program calls for innovative smart monitoring, conservation and restoration solutions under the New European Bauhaus initiative. The topic calls for a «wider involvement and social inclusion of citizens in the preservation and enhancement of cultural heritage through engagement with local ecosystems»⁷⁹.

From the policy analysis it emerged how the territorial dimension is increasingly recognized for the conservation and protection of CH for various reasons. The first is because CH is firmly rooted in the local culture, and both the local community and the local authorities have the task of keeping it intact before any other administrative hierarchical level. The second reason is that the territories have the fundamental role of observers and informers of the state of conservation of the CH, contributing with digital and digitized data to the monitoring and exchange of good practices at the European level. Therefore, for the EU, the digital preservation of local CH positively impacts local economic, social and cultural development by making good practices at the European level more accessible to local policymakers through specific digital platforms and by making the digitized CH contents more easily accessible to people.

⁷⁷ EC 2022c, p. 74.

⁷⁸ EC 2022c, p. 59.

⁷⁹ EC 2022a, p. 91.

In the following year, the Work Plan for Culture (2015-2018) stressed the importance of disseminating practices of participatory governance of CH, identifying «innovative approaches to the multilevel governance of tangible, intangible and digital heritage which involve the public sector, private stakeholders and the civil society»⁸². To make these practices possible, the document highlights the need to guarantee the «cooperation between different levels of governance and policy areas»⁸³, from the local to the European scale.

With the Work Plan for Culture (2019-2022), participation practices in CH are contextualized in the digital dimension. In fact, the plan mentions that «Digital technologies are an asset for audience development and innovative methods of participation»⁸⁴, and that their implementation needs the cross-sectoral cooperation of technology and regional and urban development areas. The plan also highlights how digital technologies offer the opportunity to better understand different audiences, reach the interests of groups with specific needs, and promote social cohesion and well-being in territories.

Finally, among the policies for culture, the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage (2019) underlines that «there is a need for new models that engage local communities, [...] and a wide range of stakeholders through open, participatory and inclusive processes» for «a more participative approach in the safeguarding and management of cultural heritage»⁸⁵. To achieve this objective, «the Commission supports digitisation and online accessibility of Europe's cultural heritage material, facilitating citizens' access and engagement with cultural heritage», promoting «the use and reuse of digital content for educational purposes»⁸⁶.

Regarding the local development policies, the role of culture in social cohesion and participation in the cultural heritage in the digital dimension has recently been underlined, especially by urban policies, that insist on a local level.

The Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) initiative supported by the ERDF considers cities as laboratories of culture-based innovation that can play an essential role in facilitating communities and citizens to benefit from the culture and artistic heritage. To make cities fruitful spaces for cultural and social development, the UIA initiative stimulates and helps in

identifying and putting in place innovative participatory governance and management models for cultural heritage and cultural assets [...] but not exclusively, by looking for synergies between urban policies and digital humanities which can contribute to culture-centred participatory urban processes⁸⁷.

⁸² Council of the EU 2014, p. 9.

⁸³ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁴ Council of the EU 2018, p.14.

⁸⁵ EC 2019, pp. 12-13.

⁸⁶ EC 2019, p. 11.

⁸⁷ UIA 2020.

On the other hand, the Interreg (2014-2020) initiative raised a different aspect of using innovative digital solutions to make CH more accessible to disabled citizens.

The Urban Agenda for the EU underlines the need to ensure the participation in CH of all social groups, «finding solutions on how to develop and strengthen local services in light of well-known major trends from digitization to diversity and at the same time keeping them low-threshold and close to the local population»⁸⁸.

Finally, the Recovery and Resilience Fund Culture and Creativity Scoreboard (2021-2026) stimulates European countries to develop «regional cultural and creative centres boosting culture across territory access to culture for people with disabilities on the silver economy by improved access to art and participation in culture»⁸⁹, also through the use of digital technologies.

Policies for innovation and digital transformation follow what has been raised by the other two areas.

The Horizon Europe program, from 2018 onwards, has proposed the importance of citizens' participation in CH through digital technologies, especially to stimulate industrial innovation. In particular, the Horizon 2020 Work Programme (2018-2020) mentions the importance of experimenting and developing new solutions by mixing cultural, technological, and social practices through community-driven and participatory approaches at a local and international level. To do this, it is necessary to find «policy-relevant solutions to local governments on how to enable citizen-driven innovation to develop and strengthen common welfare»⁹⁰.

In subsequent programming, Horizon Europe (2021-2024) has posed attention to the importance of analyzing the citizens' participation and public engagement in industrial technologies, as well as CH research. To do this, the program supports projects that promote «innovative, integrated, sustainable and participative management and business models for museums and other cultural institutions [...] to help museums and other cultural institutions become fully embedded in cities' life»⁹¹ ensuring «better access to cultural heritage and engagement with local communities, to preserve and strengthen social cohesion through inclusive and participatory procedures»⁹² using digital technologies and artificial intelligence to offer new possibilities to access heritage⁹³. It is also necessary to consider that all the projects supported by Horizon Europe are encouraged to include close interaction between national, regional, and local authorities.

⁸⁸ EC 2020a, p. 8.

⁸⁹ EC 2022b, p. 5.

⁹⁰ EC 2022b, p. 34.

⁹¹ EC 2022c, p. 43 *et seq.*

⁹² EC 2022c, p. 48.

⁹³ *Ibidem.*

4. *The evolution of the EU policy mentioning the role of digital technologies for the culture-driven local development*

Initially, the period taken into consideration for analyzing European policies for the use of digital technologies for culture-driven local development ranged from 2005 to April 2023. However, as emerged, from 2005 to 2013, the EU set up no documents and initiatives on the theme taken into consideration. It was only in 2013 and 2014, at the time of the launch of the 2014-2020 European programming, that policies and related initiatives began to deal jointly with CH, digital technologies and local development. No other documents have been published from 2014 to 2018, the European Year of Cultural Heritage. Since 2018, with an exponential increase after the pandemic, there has been a growing interest in applying digital technologies for culture-driven local development. It is possible to consult the analyzed documents that have dealt with this issue over time in Figure 4.

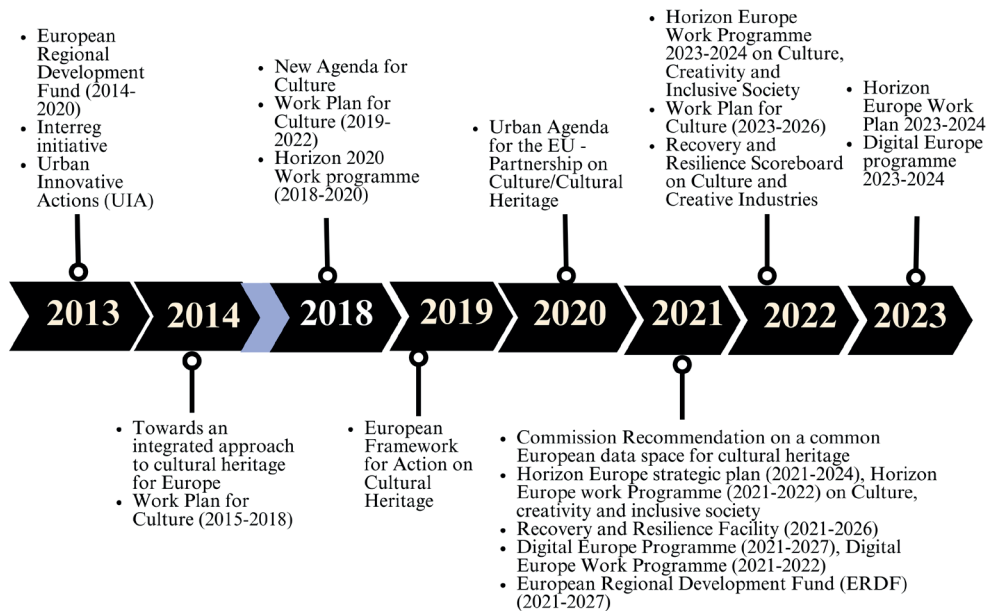


Fig. 4. Timeline with documents published by the European Union considering the application of digital technologies to cultural heritage for local development

From the analysis of the documents, it emerged how the debate on the issues of digital preservation of the local CH, enhancement of the tourist experience through digital local CH content and participation in local CH in the digital space has evolved. In particular, with the support of Table 2, i.e., a matrix coding query generated with the NVivo software, it is possible to understand the

importance given each year to the different themes in the documents analyzed, highlighting how the debate has evolved. Specifically, the group of documents published from 2013 to April 2023 was confronted with the three themes considered, obtaining the coverage percentage of the themes in different years.

Year of publication	N. of documents	Enhancement of the tourist experience through digital local cultural heritage content	Digital preservation of the local cultural heritage	Participation in cultural heritage in the digital space
2013	2	1.03%	0.71%	7.12%
2014	2	5.54%	0%	4.17%
2018	3	3.52%	34.23%	15.66%
2019	1	10.87%	4.25%	5.71%
2020	1	28.49%	0%	12.39%
2021	7	16.29%	38.87%	20.35%
2022	4	13.02%	19.75%	34.6%
2023 (until April)	1	21.23%	2.2%	0%

Tab. 2. Matrix Coding Query of the years in which the policy documents were published and the topics encoded calculated on column percentage (Source: Authors' elaboration)

As can be seen, the first document dealing with the application of digital technologies to cultural heritage for local development is the 2014-2018 programming of the European Regional Development Fund. It focused above all on participation in CH in the digital space and on the enhancement of the tourist experience through digital local CH content. The emphasis on these issues was confirmed in 2014 by the document “Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe” and the Work Plan for Culture (2015-2018). Therefore, European programming from 2014 to 2018 emphasized digital enhancement and participation in the local CH. With the subsequent programming, in 2018, considerable attention has been paid to the digital preservation of the local CH. The documents published in 2018 that considered the application of digital technologies to CH for local development were the New Agenda for Culture, the Work Plan for Culture (2019-2022) and the Horizon 2020 Work Programme (2018-2020). In 2019, only the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage considered this research's topic, emphasizing the enhancement of the tourist experience through digital local CH content. In 2020, it was only published in the final action plan of the Urban Agenda for the EU regarding the Partnership on Culture and Cultural Heritage. This document pays particular attention to enhancing the tourist experience through

digital local CH content and, to a lesser extent, to participation in CH in the digital space. Only after the closures due to the pandemic European policies and initiatives have extensively addressed the topic of the present research. The documents published that year mainly deal with the digital preservation of the local CH, followed by the participation in CH in the digital space and only then by the enhancement of the tourist experience through digital local CH content. In 2022, EU policy and initiatives emphasized the participation in CH in the digital space, followed by the digital preservation of the local CH and subsequently by the enhancement of the tourist experience through digital local CH content. The year 2023 cannot be considered significant as it has just begun. However, it can be said that the policy debate so far is oriented towards enhancing the tourist experience through digital local CH content.

5. Discussion

Three main themes emerged from our analysis: the enhancement of the local tourist experience through digital CH content, the digital preservation of the local CH, and the participation in local CH in the digital space.

Concerning the first theme, European policies often underline the benefits of applying digital technologies for enhancing and promoting CH for tourism purposes. Digital technologies, indeed, can make territories more attractive, improving the offer and enjoyment of CH both online and offline. Consequently, applying digital technologies to CH is recognized to benefit the territories by generating new jobs and commercial value and stimulating the local community's sense of belonging. As seen in the literature, the digital enhancement and promotion of CH can lead to opportunities but also to risks. The EU considers the risk that digitized CH can be used out of its context, conveying messages contrary to the intended. This drawback is strictly related to the perceived loss of control over the uses of digital cultural objects⁹⁷. In this regard, the European policies are in line with the literature on this theme.

Regarding the second theme, European policies underline the opportunities arising from using digital technologies, such as improving techniques and methods for protecting, restoring and conserving CH. Digital technologies are recognized to facilitate the exchange of information and experiences between local authorities, stimulating a sensitivity to local heritage and a sense of belonging to the community. However, European policies do not mention the risks that can derive from the digital preservation of CH, unlike what is starting to happen in the literature.

⁹⁷ EC 2022a.

Finally, with respect to the third theme, EU policies emphasize the importance of CH participatory practices to create supportive environments for culture-led innovation both online and offline. EU policies recognize the opportunities arising from the digital channels, such as the possibility to give life to new participatory governance and management models for CH, and to involve all social groups. These conditions allow to experiment and develop new solutions combining collective cultural, technological and social practices in local communities. The policies also highlight how the improved participation in the digital dimension allows local cultural organizations to establish closer relationships with the audiences and to remain relevant players in the local fabric. The policies underline how participation in CH, facilitated through digital communication channels, is important for local development for three purposes: facilitating social cohesion, strengthening common welfare, and stimulating industrial innovation. As for the second theme, however, the policies do not mention the possible risks deriving from these technologies, unlike the academic literature. This denotes the gap in European policy on risk assessment of the digital transformation of CH, on which academics and practitioners in the sector are working.

The evidence from the analysis of European policies is reflected in the most recent literature on the regional economy.

Regarding the reuse of digitized cultural content for tourism purposes, the regional economics literature has identified the opportunity, recognizing that digitized CH resources could help raise awareness of cultural destinations, bringing economic and social benefits. However, as the literature point out, looking at tourism as the only positive economic contribution to the territory's CH is limiting, acknowledging that the presence of CH can contribute to the local intellectual capital, affecting the critical, learning and innovating skills.

As presented, European policies recognize two other themes regarding the role of digital technologies in culture-driven local development processes, which contribute to completing the vision beyond tourism: digital preservation and online participation. Conservation is essential to preserve the CH for future generations and use digital technologies to continue attributing a symbolic value to them. However, conservation without local community participation and awareness may be ineffective, as loss of cultural significance may still occur.

These reflections lead to another result deriving from the policy analysis, concerning the interrelated character of the three main themes that emerged. As underlined by Cerisola (2019), from the introduction of the New European Agenda for Culture, heritage conservation aims to maintain the values that heritage embodies to be experienced in the stories and intrinsic meanings through participation. At the same time, Borin and Donato (2020) stated that, after the European Year of Cultural Heritage, there had been a shift in the approach to CH: from pure conservation to a more open and participatory approach to CH, leading to an interpenetration of these themes.

From the present analysis of the policies, it has been possible to outline some examples in this direction. For example, the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage (2019) mentions the importance of participatory approaches for monitoring and managing CH, overlapping participation and conservation scopes. The Urban Agenda and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (2021-2026) underline how the digitization of CH is useful not only for conservation purposes, but also for the promotion and enhancement of heritage through the creation of remote cultural offers for touristic purposes, superimposing conservation and promotion scopes. Similarly, the Urban Agenda and the Horizon Work Programme (2023-2024) highlight how important the participation of the local community is in promoting territorial identity through the online communication of its CH for tourism purposes, overlapping participation and promotion spheres. To date, these functions are converging through the use of digital technologies. The Horizon Work Programme (2023-2024) links the functions of conservation, promotion and participation in CH by creating the European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage. It broadens social inclusion in heritage conservation and enhancement through engagement with local ecosystems. Finally, a case in point is the intention to create the *CitiVerse*, i.e., a large digital twin made up of existing interconnected local digital twins, in which the digital layer in AR or VR is affixed to the physical one. The *CitiVerse* initiative aims to develop a digital twin to help local authorities and citizens in spatial planning «while also enhancing the social, architectural, green and cultural heritage dimension of living spaces»⁹⁸. In these immersive digital environments, it will be possible to navigate «in a community, discovering its assets such as culture, history, tourism and offering innovative services related to tourism, entertainment, shopping, future development and urban planning, etc., infrastructure management and sustainable mobility»⁹⁹. It follows that, in the digital dimension of the territories, the different activities related to cultural heritage are transcended, superimposing conservation, enhancement and participation in the local CH.

The literature confirms this result. In particular, Lazzeretti (2022) underlined how the digital revolution brought cultural conservation and enhancement to converge. For this reason, it is necessary to rethink the protection, conservation, and enhancement policies starting from the diversity of resources and the nature and functions of the territories.

⁹⁸ EC 2023, p. 58.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

6. Conclusions

Although the academic literature and policymakers in Europe have recognized the fundamental contribution of CH to local development and are beginning to reflect on the impact of digital technologies on culture, contributions investigating the role of digital technologies in culture-driven local development are still limited.

For this reason, the research aimed to identify where the European policies for CH, local development, and digital transformation converge.

The analysis revealed how the meeting points between cultural heritage, local development and digital transformation are increasingly frequent in European policies, especially after the pandemic.

However, the analysis of European policies has revealed how the synergies between culture, digital and local development are still rarely considered in European policies, which can curb potential opportunities in this direction. CH, for example, is often not explicitly mentioned in European policies and initiatives in other areas, such as regional development and digital transformation, although it can contribute to all the priorities set by the programmatic lines on these issues. Similarly, policies strictly dedicated to culture often do not consider the local context of which the heritage is expression. Consequently, development trajectories, mutual opportunities, and synergies between these dimensions are not yet sufficiently recognized.

This research aims to contribute to the regional and cultural economics literature debate by highlighting the most promising themes related to using digital technologies in culture for local economic development. At the same time, it outlined the state of the art of European policies on this theme to stimulate the reflection of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners on which themes may not yet have been sufficiently considered, limiting the related opportunities.

However, the present study has some limitations. Firstly, cultural policies regarding libraries have been excluded, even if they have been the vanguard in digitization and cultural participation. The second limitation concerns the exclusively qualitative method of analysis. Future research may employ interviews with EU policy experts and automated text analysis to validate the present findings and supplement them against more in-depth studies.

Future research in the local development literature, in addition to remedying the limitations of the present study, could deepen two promising research lines.

The first concerns the contributions to local economic development and the synergies that can be triggered by the three themes that have emerged: the enhancement of the local tourist experience through digital CH content, the digital preservation of the local CH, and the participation in local CH in the digital space.

The second theme concerns the comparison between the themes highlighted by the analysis of European policies, the themes of the national policies of the Member States, and the issues currently most felt by CH practitioners regarding the synergistic contribution of digital technologies and CH for local development. It can be interesting to verify whether the themes of the policies are in line with the needs and themes currently discussed by those who are called to apply or be inspired by them.

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Annexes

<i>Final Database of EU Policy for Cultural Heritage, Regional Policy and EU Digital Single Market Policy</i>	
EU Cultural Policy Framework	European Commission communication “Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe” (2014)
	Work Plan for Culture (2015-2018)
	New Agenda for Culture (2018)
	Work Plan for Culture (2019-2022)
	European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage (2019)
	Work Plan for Culture (2023-2026)
EU Regional Policy Framework	European Regional Development Fund (2014-2020)
	European Regional Development Fund (2021-2027)
EU programmes and initiatives for culture-led regional and urban development	Interreg (2014-2020)
	Interreg (2021-2027)
	Recovery and Resilience Facility (2021-2026)
	Recovery and Resilience Fund Culture and Creativity Scoreboard (2021-2026)
	Urban Agenda for the EU – Partnership on Culture/Cultural Heritage
	Urban Innovative Actions
EU programmes and initiatives for cultural heritage’s digital transformation	Horizon 2020 Work Programme (2018-2020)
	Horizon Europe Strategic Plan (2021-2024)
	Horizon Europe Work Programme (2021-2022)
	Horizon Europe Work Programme (2023-2024)
	Commission Recommendation on a common European data space for cultural heritage (2021)
	Digital Europe Programme (2021-2027)
	Digital Europe Work Programme (2021-2022)
	Digital Europe Work Programme (2023-2024)

Annex A. Final Database of EU Policy, programmes and initiatives taken into consideration for the analysis

which can threaten the preservation of the tangible and intangible heritage. The challenge for urban areas is three-fold: i) to safeguard the heritage from possible damage; ii) to improve the quality of Cultural Heritage and open/green spaces; and iii) to contribute to urban resilience by supporting new quality areas and projects that do not add pressure or constitute potential threats to the environment.

Cultural Services and Culture for Inclusive Cities

A major challenge is, how, in urban societies that are becoming increasingly older and diverse and are facing growing differences in income, the cultural participation of all social groups can be guaranteed. The Partnership aims to overcome the barriers to access Culture for all, finding solutions on how to develop and strengthen local services in light of well-known major trends from digitization to diversity and at the same time keeping them low-threshold and close to the local population.

Financial Sustainability and Funding (cross-cutting topic)

This topic deals with the financial aspects related to investments in the field of Culture and Cultural Heritage aimed at the conservation and enhancement of buildings, monuments and structures, the



Annex B. Example of the NVivo 14 software interface with the coding stripes on the side

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