



Design of a cultural tourism product in the valorization of the traditional weaving of toquilla straw in the commune of Pile, Montecristi

Diseño de un producto turístico cultural en la valorización del tejido tradicional de paja toquilla en la comuna Pile, Montecristi

Choez-Loor, Evelyn Dayanna¹

Mera-Cárdenas, Flor María^{1*}

¹Escuela Superior Politécnica Agropecuaria de Manabí, Calceta, Ecuador

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Corresponding author*: fmara@espam.edu.ec

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ABSTRACT

The research addressed the valorization of traditional toquilla straw weaving in Pile, Montecristi, as a key resource for the development of cultural tourism products. The objective was to analyze the sociocultural elements associated with this practice and evaluate its tourism potential. A qualitative and participatory methodology was used through interviews with artisans, direct observation and the analysis of a potentiality's matrix. The results showed that toquilla straw weaving not only represents an intangible cultural heritage, but also an opportunity to diversify the tourism offer through the creation of a thematic route called "Route of the hats". This proposal integrates activities such as interactive workshops, demonstrations of the handicraft process and tours of the toquillales. This initiative promotes cultural sustainability and community participation, strengthening the local economy and preserving tradition. The research concluded that the integration of marketing and training strategies can enhance the competitiveness of this tourism product, making it a replicable model for other communities.

Keywords: community-based tourism; crafts; cultural heritage; cultural tourism; sustainability

RESUMEN

La investigación abordó la valorización del tejido tradicional de paja toquilla en Pile, Montecristi, como recurso clave para el desarrollo de productos turísticos culturales. El objetivo fue analizar los elementos socioculturales asociados a esta práctica y evaluar su potencial turístico. Se utilizó una metodología cualitativa y participativa mediante entrevistas a artesanos, observación directa y el análisis de una matriz de potencialidades. Los resultados evidenciaron que el tejido de paja toquilla no solo representa un patrimonio cultural inmaterial, sino también una oportunidad para diversificar la oferta turística mediante la creación de una ruta temática denominada "Ruta de los sombreros". Esta propuesta integra actividades como talleres interactivos, demostraciones del proceso artesanal y recorridos por los toquillales. La iniciativa promueve la sostenibilidad cultural y la participación comunitaria, fortaleciendo la economía local y preservando la tradición. La investigación concluyó que la integración de estrategias de marketing y capacitación puede potenciar la competitividad de este producto turístico, convirtiéndolo en un modelo replicable para otras comunidades.

Palabras clave: turismo comunitario; artesanía; patrimonio cultural; turismo cultural; sostenibilidad



1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism plays a fundamental role in promoting and preserving the historical and cultural richness of a destination. Tourism products are essential elements for attracting, satisfying, and retaining tourists by incorporating unique attributes that contribute to their distinctive positioning in the market (Arias et al., 2023). These cultural products encompass much more than specific destinations or attractions, as they include a wide range of services and experiences designed to meet tourists' needs and preferences.

Cultural tourism products generate authentic experiences that strengthen destination identity and promote the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (Mera et al., 2024). In the province of Manabí, Ecuador, entrepreneurs face significant limitations in terms of training and government support, which hinder the effective development of their products. According to Díaz et al. (2023), 68.2% of artisans believe that the lack of infrastructure in the sector significantly affects the production, commercialization, and visibility of the outcomes of their work.

For this reason, stagnation in product innovation and diversification constitutes an obstacle that limits the potential for economic growth. Likewise, businesses struggle to adapt to changing consumer demands and preferences, placing them at risk of becoming obsolete (Zambrano et al., 2022). However, the Ministry of Tourism [MINTUR] (2023) reports an increase in tourist arrivals and benefits in terms of employment and economic growth, although these benefits are not fully reflected within the community. In Montecristi, the limited promotion of toquilla straw reduces its recognition despite its considerable value as a cultural resource (Falcones et al., 2023).

Furthermore, low investment in technology and training limits the competitiveness of the cultural products market in the area (Díaz et al., 2022). This directly affects the preservation of traditional techniques, such as toquilla straw hat weaving, which faces threats including artisan migration and competition from industrialized products (Vélez & Erazo, 2022). The aging of artisans and the lack of intergenerational knowledge transmission further exacerbate this situation.

The tradition of toquilla straw weaving in Pile illustrates how cultural heritage can be at risk due to digital transformation and acculturation (Padilla & Herrera, 2023). In response, the development of cultural tourism products is oriented toward sustainability by integrating social, environmental, and economic dimensions. Innovation in this sector seeks to create experiences that protect and enhance cultural heritage while simultaneously generating socioeconomic benefits (Mera et al., 2024).

The purpose of this research is to analyze the culture of toquilla straw weaving in Pile, Montecristi, by identifying its key elements and evaluating its potential as a tourist attraction. The study seeks to foster community participation in the development of a tourism product that enhances and preserves this tradition while promoting sustainable strategies to ensure its continuity and generate benefits for the local community.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study was conducted in the community of Pile, located in Montecristi Canton, Manabí Province, Ecuador, over a 10-week period between August and October 2024. The research was qualitative and field-based, with an applied and participatory approach aimed at developing a cultural tourism product centered on traditional toquilla straw weaving.

In the first phase, an analysis of the elements that comprise the culture of traditional weaving was conducted. Key materials and tools, as well as associated sociocultural elements, were identified. Analytical and synthetic methods were used to break down and understand the distinctive characteristics of this tradition. The techniques employed included a literature review and interviews with 10 local artisans and experts, while responsibly ensuring compliance with ethical principles such as informed consent,

confidentiality of information, and respect for the community's cultural identity. Interviews were chosen instead of surveys due to the qualitative nature of the research and the depth of information required to understand the cultural and technical aspects of toquilla straw weaving.

The second phase focused on the development of a comprehensive cultural tourism product. At this stage, the tourism potential of the cultural products was analyzed, including the available infrastructure, accessibility, and services. In addition, the integration of the elements of the tourism system and the target audience was designed. The observation technique was used, providing a solid basis for assessing the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing the product. The tool used for this analysis was the potential assessment matrix proposed by Villegas and Sánchez (2000), which made it possible to systematically evaluate the available resources.

The final phase consisted of developing promotion and marketing strategies for the tourism product, including the creation of its brand as a key step. Analytical and synthetic methods continued to serve as the basis of the methodological approach, together with brainstorming techniques for generating ideas and developing the marketing proposal. For this activity, potential strategies were compiled and considered according to the most effective marketing approaches, taking into account the characteristics of the product to be developed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Analysis of the Elements that Comprise the Culture of Traditional Weaving

3.1.1. Identification of Key Materials and Tools for Traditional Weaving

Traditional weaving is an artisanal technique that reflects ancestral knowledge and creativity in the production of unique pieces. The main material used is toquilla straw, a plant fiber obtained from the *Carludovica palmata* palm, native to the coastal regions of Ecuador, particularly the province of Manabí. According to Ramos et al. (2020), the quality of the main material used in traditional weaving directly influences the quality of the final product.

Several traditional tools used by artisans stand out, such as the *matiancho* or a cup of water, an inclined wooden mold that facilitates the weaving process, hat blocks, a board, and a shoehorn. The use of simple but effective items, such as a sheet or pillow to protect the chest while working, reflects the need for comfort during such a detailed manual process (Table 1).

Table 1. Interviews with Artisans and Local Experts

Questions	Interviewees									
	Mr. Wilson Alarcón	Ms. Paulina Ordóñez	Ms. Graciela López	Mr. Fidel Espinal	Ms. Yolanda Alarcón	Mr. Domingo Carranza	Mr. Carlos Carranza	Ms. Rosa Espinal	Mr. Simón Espinal	Ms. Luisa Bailón
How did the tradition of toquilla straw weaving originate?	Ancestors	Ancestral tradition	Family roots	Cultural heritage	Heritage	Ancestral heritage	Tradition	Heritage	Ancestors	Ancestors
What weaving techniques are used?	Circular	Spiral weaving	Spiral weaving	Spiral weaving	Circular and finishing	Spiral weaving	Circular weaving	Circular weaving	Spiral weaving	Spiral weaving
What materials are needed to make toquilla straw products?	Raw material	Toquilla straw	Toquilla straw and water	Toquilla straw and natural dyes	Toquilla straw and dyes	Toquilla straw	Toquilla straw	Toquilla straw	Toquilla straw and water	Toquilla straw

What tools are used for weaving?	Matiancho	Knives	Wooden molds	Metal combs	Molds	Shoehorn	Wooden molds	Knives	Hat blocks	Metal combs
What is the production process?	Harvesting, drying, splitting, and assembling	Cutting, weaving, and shaping	Selection, drying, and shaping	Cutting, weaving, and finishing	Selection, drying, and weaving	Cutting, weaving, and shaping	Harvesting, drying, and finishing	Cutting, drying, and shaping	Harvesting, drying, weaving, and finishing	Cutting, weaving, and shaping

Table 1 shows how the ancestral legacy of toquilla straw weaving forms part of the cultural heritage, incorporating techniques such as spiral and circular weaving. The combination of toquilla straw as the primary material and traditional tools contributes to the preservation of this artisanal practice. Its production process, which includes harvesting, drying, and shaping, reflects its cultural and tourism significance.

3.1.2. Identification of Sociocultural Elements

This section identifies the sociocultural elements, which are presented below:

Table 2. Sociocultural elements

Aspect	Description
Historical origins	Toquilla straw weaving is an ancestral tradition preserved for generations in Pile, Montecristi. Its transmission within families has consolidated this craft as a cultural emblem of Ecuador, internationally renowned for the quality and fineness of its hats.
Social organization and community roles	The weaving practice involves the entire community, with clearly defined roles: men harvest and process the straw, while women weave. Although young people participate, migration to cities threatens the continuity of this tradition.
Connection with nature and sustainability	Production depends on the <i>Carludovica palmata</i> palm and natural cycles, such as climate and water quality. This respect for the natural environment ensures the sustainability of weaving and strengthens its relationship with the environment.
Traditional practices and techniques	Specialized techniques, such as circular weaving, require months of work to produce high-quality hats. Adaptation to modern demands, such as the use of colors, reflects the capacity for innovation without losing the cultural essence of the tradition.
Economic impact and international recognition	Weaving is the main source of income in Pile. Its recognition as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity has positioned these hats in international markets, promoting cultural tourism and the local economy.
Contemporary challenges	Youth migration, climate change, and limited access to markets constrain the development of this practice. Strategies such as cooperatives and government support are necessary to ensure its future sustainability.

The identification of the sociocultural elements of toquilla straw weaving in the community highlights its relevance not only as an artisanal practice but also as an emblem of cultural identity and an economic driver for the community. These findings are consistent with Torres et al. (2024), who emphasize that this practice has evolved through the intergenerational transmission of techniques, creativity in design, and the organization of cultural events that strengthen its tourism value.

3.2. Development of a Comprehensive Cultural Tourism Product

3.2.1. Analysis of the Tourism Potential of Cultural Products

To analyze the tourism potential of Pile’s cultural products, a rating scale from 1 to 3 was used to rank resources of tourism interest across four dimensions: cultural (C), environmental (A), scenic (P), and sports-related (D). In addition, key functional aspects were considered, including dynamics (d), use (u), accessibility (a), and facilities (e), which were evaluated on a scale from 1 to 4. This tool makes it possible to identify the resources with the greatest potential for tourism development in the community (Table 3).

Table 3. Tourism potential assessment matrix

Attractions and/or Resources	Score	Tourism Potential
Toquilla straw handicrafts	20	Highest potential
Pile Artisan Training Center	19	
Toquilla palm groves	18	Emerging potential
Patron saint festivities	18	
Pile roundabout	16	

Table 3 highlights that toquilla straw handicrafts and the Artisan Training Center have the greatest tourism potential due to their cultural value and appeal to visitors interested in authentic experiences. The toquilla palm groves and patron saint festivities are resources with emerging potential that could be strengthened through promotional strategies and improved tourism infrastructure. Although the Pile roundabout has a lower score in the matrix, it stands out for its symbolic importance as a landmark. Its tourism potential could be enhanced through strategies that increase its attractiveness and integrate it more actively into the community's development.

According to the research by Pita Lino et al. (2021), these products stand out not only because of the diversity of resources they encompass, such as cultural expressions, gastronomy, and festivities, but also because of their ability to attract different segments of the tourism market interested in authentic experiences. In the case of Pile, the identification of key resources, such as toquilla palm groves, artisan workshops, and the weaving tradition, made it possible to assess their tourism appeal.

3.2.2. Analysis of Infrastructure, Accessibility, and Services Available in the Study Area

The community of Pile has a population of approximately 1,100 inhabitants distributed across more than 80 households. Despite the availability of basic services such as electricity and piped water from the nearby hills, sanitation conditions remain limited: most households use septic tanks rather than being connected to the public sewerage system. This limits access to an efficient sanitation system and may potentially affect tourism development in the area. In addition, the community lacks landline and mobile phone coverage, which restricts connectivity for both residents and tourists (Villamar et al., 2021).

The community faces challenging economic conditions. Most residents earn less than USD 200 per month, and some receive social assistance through the Human Development Bonus (Bono de Desarrollo Humano), which helps alleviate economic hardship but remains insufficient to significantly improve their quality of life. Economic activities in Pile are limited, with agriculture and the production of toquilla straw hats serving as the main occupations.

The production of these hats, an activity involving 20% of the population, has been passed down from generation to generation and has become integrated into the community's daily life. However, due to low income levels, some residents have sought employment in other sectors, such as construction and fishing (Villamar et al., 2021).

3.2.3. Integration of Tourism System Elements into the Product to Be Developed

The tourism system in Pile is structured around cultural resources, such as toquilla straw handicrafts, the Pile roundabout as a landmark, and community participation, which promotes sustainable tourism.

The proposed tourism product, called the "Hat Route," integrates these elements into a unique itinerary that allows visitors to gain first-hand knowledge of the ancestral technique and artisanal process involved in hat making. This tourism product not only highlights the community's cultural richness but also fosters the local economy and contributes to the preservation of this tradition. Furthermore, it is based on the resources previously identified (Table 3), ensuring consistency between the selected tourism elements and the product design (Table 4).

Table 4. Proposed tourism product

Toquilla Straw Hat Route in Pile	
Welcome at the Pile Cultural Center	Location: Pile Roundabout. Activity: Welcome by a local guide, introduction to the history of Pile and toquilla straw hats. Elements: Informational brochures, infographics on the weaving process, and introduction to the tour
Weaving Process Demonstration	Location: Artisan workshops in the community. Activity: Artisans demonstrate the weaving process, from harvesting and drying the straw to the final weaving stage. Interactive experience: Visitors can try basic techniques under the supervision of artisans. Objective: Enhance appreciation of artisanal work and demonstrate the effort involved in producing each hat.
Hands-on Hat Customization Workshop	Activity: Customization of hats using colors and styles under the guidance of local artisans. Optional: Purchase of the customized hat as a souvenir. Benefit: Encourage direct sales and provide economic support to artisans.
Route through the Toquilla Palm Groves	Lugar: Plantaciones de paja toquilla cercanas a Pile Actividad: Recorrido guiado por los campos, explicando el cultivo y cosecha sostenible de la paja toquilla. Objetivo: Conectar a los visitantes con el entorno natural y su relevancia para la creación de sombreros.
Local Gastronomic Tasting	Location: Toquilla straw plantations near Pile. Activity: Guided tour through the fields, explaining the sustainable cultivation and harvesting of toquilla straw. Objective: Connect visitors with the natural environment and highlight its importance in hat production.
Community Shop for Artisan Products	Location: Community courtyard or gastronomic area. Activity: Tasting of typical Manabí dishes, such as Manabí-style ceviche and empanadas de verde. Objective: Complement the experience with local cuisine while generating additional income.
Tour Duration	Approximately 4 hours.

The integration of tourism system elements is essential to ensure the success and sustainability of the “Hat Route” in the community of Pile. According to Cuétara et al. (2022), an efficient tourism system combines resources, services, and infrastructure to meet visitors’ needs as well as the expectations of the local community. In the case of toquilla straw weaving, the initial assessment made it possible to identify cultural and natural resources, such as the toquilla palm groves and artisan workshops, which stand out for their authenticity and appeal. The product design focused on combining these elements through interactive activities.

3.2.4. Determination of the Target Audience for the Cultural Tourism Product

To determine the target audience, the studies by Torres et al. (2024) and Andrade et al. (2024) were used as a basis. Accordingly, the target audience profile for the “Hat Route” tourism product is defined as follows:

Table 5. Target audience profile

Aspects	Torres et al. (2024)	Andrade et al. (2024)
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Age	Greater interest among young people aged 18–30 and older adults over 60 years of age.	Greater interest among people aged 46 and older.
Origin	Domestic tourists predominate, particularly those from Quito..	Origin not specified.
Cultural interests	Interest in learning about the artisanal tradition and purchasing exclusive hats.	Interest in learning about local history, culture, and traditions.
Preferred activities	Weaving workshops and personalized experiences to connect with local culture.	Additional interest in wildlife observation.
Destination appreciation	Authenticity and connection with local culture as key motivations.	Authenticity and connection with local culture.

The identified target audience profiles highlight a shared interest in authenticity, local culture, and the tradition of toquilla straw weaving. Torres et al. (2024) identify young people and older adults as the main visitors, motivated by personalized experiences, while Andrade et al. (2024) focus their analysis on individuals over 46 years of age who are interested in history and nature. Both studies agree on the importance of providing a deep cultural connection.

3.3. Development of Promotion and Marketing Strategies for the Tourism Product

3.3.1. Brand Design for the Comprehensive Tourism Product

Brand design for the comprehensive tourism product is an essential strategy for positioning and differentiating the product in the market. The creation of the brand seeks to convey the identity and cultural values of toquilla straw weaving in Pile, highlighting its authenticity, tradition, and exclusivity. Furthermore, it aims to strengthen the emotional connection with the target audience, who value unique and authentic experiences (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Brand of the comprehensive tourism product

The brand not only serves as a visual identifier but also as a tool for building and promoting the destination's cultural narrative. According to the research by Carrasco et al. (2022), the brand equity of a tourism destination is built through tourists' experiences. In this way, a well-designed brand not only reflects the tradition and identity of the product but also fosters a deep emotional connection with visitors, who, by sharing their experiences on social media, become ambassadors for the destination. This contributes to consolidating the brand's presence in the market and attracting tourists seeking authentic experiences.

3.3.2. Promotion and Marketing Strategies for the Cultural Tourism Product

Promotion and marketing strategies for a cultural tourism product, such as toquilla straw weaving in the community of Pile, can be strengthened through various marketing tactics that combine digital, experiential, and content-based approaches.

Content marketing, according to Castilla et al. (2023), is essential for building a strong connection with customers, particularly in a digital environment. Creating relevant and engaging content makes it possible not only to position the brand but also to build tourist loyalty by consistently delivering value through digital platforms. This strategy is particularly useful for cultural products that require continuous communication of their identity and traditions.

Digital marketing, on the other hand, is key to adapting to the new post-pandemic environment. Cortez et al. (2022) emphasize that digital media enable tourism businesses to reach a broad audience with limited budgets by leveraging platforms such as social media and YouTube to showcase detailed experiences and connect effectively with consumers. As tourists increasingly seek information through digital platforms, this strategy is essential for reaching a wider audience.

Furthermore, experiential marketing, as proposed by Cardoso et al. (2021), is a powerful tool for generating emotions and memorable experiences, which are fundamental elements of a cultural tourism product. The integration of these strategies allows tourists not only to learn about a tradition but also to engage in a sensory and interactive experience, creating emotional bonds with the local culture and fostering a stronger connection with the product.

Taken together, these strategies are complementary and effective for promoting the cultural tourism product in Pile, as they highlight both the authenticity of the product and the emotional connection that tourists seek in their experiences. The combination of content, digital, and experiential marketing provides a comprehensive approach to positioning and differentiating the product in today's competitive market while maximizing opportunities for interaction and loyalty among the target audience.

CONCLUSIONS

The present research demonstrates that traditional toquilla straw weaving in Pile, Montecristi, constitutes a valuable cultural resource with significant potential for the development of sustainable tourism products. The identification of sociocultural elements made it possible to design a comprehensive tourism route that connects visitors with the artisanal tradition, promoting community participation and the appreciation of intangible cultural heritage.

The results highlight the need to implement effective marketing strategies and training programs to strengthen the competitiveness of the artisanal tourism sector in the face of contemporary challenges such as youth migration and limited access to international markets. Further research is recommended to assess the economic and social impacts of cultural tourism on the community and to explore technological innovations that enhance the preservation and dissemination of this tradition. The findings benefit not only the local community by stimulating its economy and preserving its identity, but also the promotion of sustainable cultural tourism in Ecuador.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the subject matter of this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing: Choez-Loor, E. L. and Mera-Cárdenas, F. M.

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