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Tourism and Inequality in the European Union: Exploring the Determinants of Tourism Spending through a Multivariate Approach

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Abstract: This paper aims to identify and analyze economic, social, and demographic factors influencing tourism expenditures across 26 European Union member states, offering a multidimensional perspective on consumer behavior in tourism.

The study uses panel data from 2014 to 2023 obtained from Eurostat, covering all EU countries except Sweden. Variables analyzed include GDP per capita, Gini coefficient, education level, demographic structure, and life satisfaction. A correlation analysis for 2023 explores the relationships between tourism expenditure and selected socio-economic indicators.

The findings reveal significant differences in the level and composition of tourism expenditures between higher- and lower-income countries. In wealthier nations, expenditure is linked to income, social inequality, age, and life satisfaction. In less affluent countries, income, age structure, and education play a more prominent role.

This study combines traditional economic indicators with social and psychographic determinants, emphasizing the role of quality of life in shaping sustainable tourism behavior.

Further research is needed to explore causal relationships and regional patterns affecting tourism expenditure and access, supporting more targeted and effective policy interventions.

The findings support the design of inclusive tourism strategies that reflect varying development levels and cultural contexts, promoting regional cohesion and equitable access. Improving access for disadvantaged groups, such as older adults, low-income populations, and people with disabilities, is a key priority amid Europe's aging society.

Keywords: tourism determinants; tourism expenditure; consumer behavior; economic tourism exclusion

JEL Classification: Z32; D12; D63; D91; R20.

Introduction

Tourism is a key sector of both the global economy and the European Union, contributing nearly €1.8 trillion to the EU's GDP in 2024 and accounting for over 10% of the entire economy (WTTC 2024). In 2023, EU residents spent approximately €555 billion on tourism, with 77% of that related to travel within the European Union (Eurostat 2025). Considering tourism's significant contribution to socioeconomic development, this article addresses the contemporary challenges facing EU member states, both as a global leader in tourism and as a region striving for a more equitable and sustainable future.

This study is based on the hypothesis that tourism expenditure is shaped by a complex interplay of social and economic factors, which may vary depending on a country's level of economic development. The analysis examines the socioeconomic and demographic determinants of tourism expenditure across 26 EU member states, focusing on 2023 as a representative post-pandemic year. It includes variables such as income, social inequality (Gini coefficient), demographic structure (average age, education level, degree of urbanization), price dynamics (HICP), and subjective assessments of quality of life. Using cross-sectional data analyzed with the Gretl software, the results show that national wealth significantly influences these determinants, as countries with higher income levels are affected by different factors than those with lower economic development. In the context of increasing mobility and tourism consumption, the findings offer valuable insights for shaping tourism policies

that promote social inclusion, reduce regional disparities, and support the sustainable development of the tourism sector.

1. Research Background

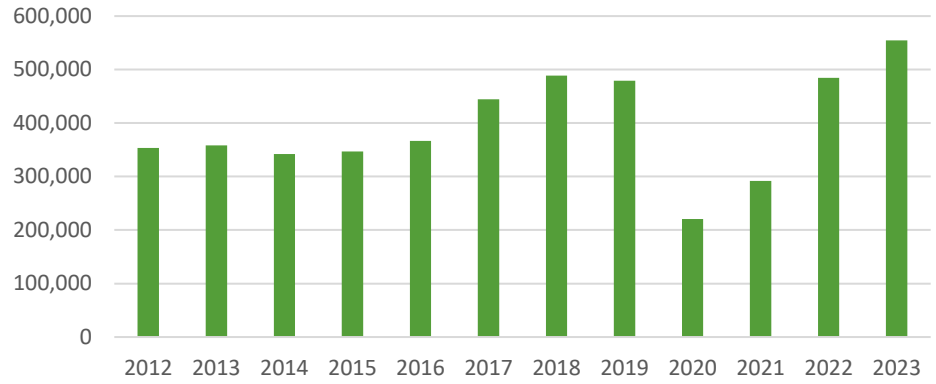
Tourism has become a vital driver of socio-economic development, contributing to several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as poverty and unemployment reduction, climate change mitigation, and environmental protection (UNWTO and UNDP 2017). Its growing importance is reflected in the increasing share of the sector within the global economy (UNWTO 2024). It plays a vital role in the expanding service-based economy by generating revenue and foreign exchange, creating employment opportunities, fostering regional development, and strengthening local communities (OECD 2020). Various definitions of tourism emphasize different dimensions of the phenomenon. For instance, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2019) focuses on tourist motivations and activities, while UNESCO (2011) highlights the protection of natural and cultural resources as a basis for responsible tourism development. Eurostat (2025), by contrast, adopts an operational approach centered on measurement, which is essential for cross-country comparisons. Despite these differences, all definitions acknowledge the complexity of tourism, encompassing both human mobility and the related consumption and activities.

As previously mentioned, tourism is a key pillar of the global economy; however, its impact largely depends on the level of development and the sector's significance within a given country (Brida *et al.* 2020). Inchausti-Sintes (2015) notes that tourism can promote GDP growth, improve the trade balance, and reduce unemployment - especially in the short and medium term. On the other hand, at the macroeconomic level, overexpansion of the sector may lead to the structural weakening of traditional industries such as agriculture, manufacturing, and energy. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as "Dutch disease." Given this risk, effective tourism development requires active public administration involvement in infrastructure provision, spatial planning, sector promotion, and the protection of tourism and cultural resources, as emphasized by Duran-Román *et al.* (2020). These authors highlight the need for balanced policies that ensure sustainable development while minimizing over-reliance on tourism.

In this context, the concept of sustainable tourism, defined by Bramwell *et al.* (2017) as an approach that balances environmental, economic, social, and cultural interests, gains particular importance. This includes addressing overtourism, involving local communities in decision-making processes, and adopting digital innovations such as e-tourism and digital tourism management systems. Equally important is implementing proven governance models, especially in countries with untapped tourism potential, to foster economic diversification, job creation, and cultural heritage preservation (Muça *et al.* 2022). According to the OECD (2024), well-managed tourism can contribute to inclusive economic growth, whereas uncontrolled development may lead to social tensions and inequality. Chulaphan and Barahona (2021) further emphasize the need to support sustainable tourism forms, such as ecotourism, health tourism, adventure tourism, and cultural tourism, stressing that effective tourism policy should be adapted to local conditions and ensure economic viability.

Musriha and Rapitasari (2023), meanwhile, highlight another crucial dimension of the tourism sector, the quality of tourism services. High service quality has a positive impact on customer loyalty and profitability, particularly during periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences of recent years underscore the urgent need to develop more resilient, adaptable, and long-term sustainable tourism models. Such models aim not only to strengthen the sector's ability to withstand future shocks, but also to reduce the economic overdependence on tourism in certain countries (Inchausti-Sintes, 2015). Despite the significant challenges posed by the pandemic, data published by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2024) reveal a strong rebound and a continued upward trajectory for the sector. According to current forecasts, total export revenues from tourism, including passenger transport, are expected to reach a record $1.9 trillion in 2024 (UNWTO, 2025). Similarly, the travel and tourism sector in the European Union is projected to contribute nearly €1.8 trillion to the bloc's GDP, accounting for 10.5% of the total economy (WTTC, 2024). Meanwhile, according to Eurostat (2025), tourism expenditure in the EU returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2023, following a dramatic decline in 2020 and 2021 (see Figure 1), and exceeding €500 billion. These figures underscore the sector's renewed importance as a driver of socio-economic development.

Figure 1. Level of Tourism Expenditure in the European Union (milion EUR)

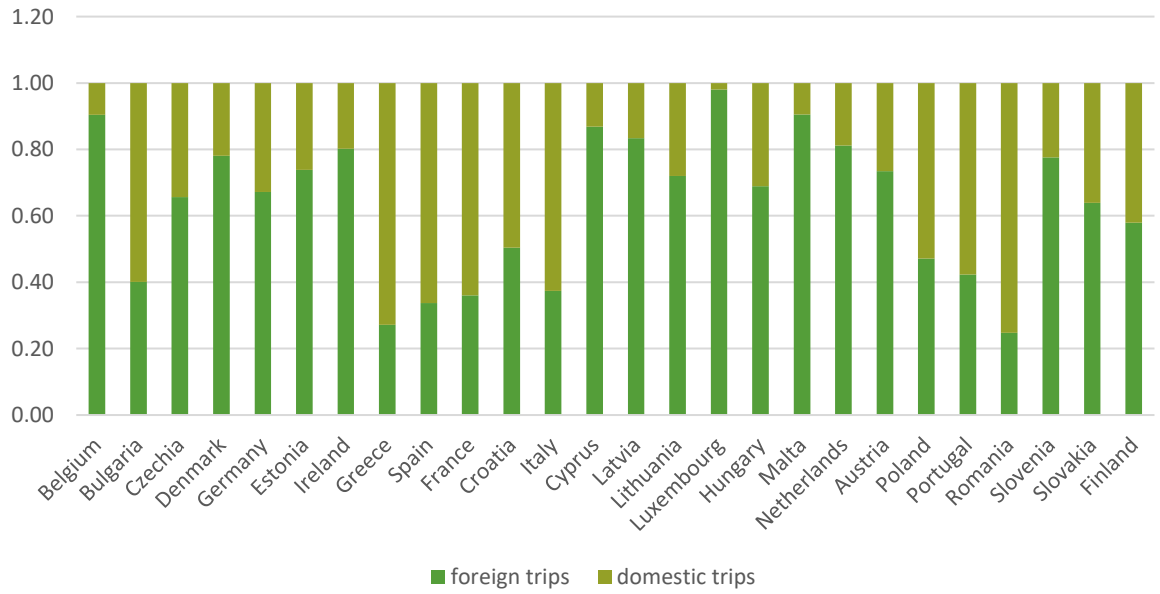


Source: own presentation based on data provided by Eurostat (2025).

The recovery is also reflected in the rebound of international tourist flows. The number of international tourist arrivals is projected to hit 1.4 billion. In this context, Europe plays a particularly prominent role, maintaining its status as the world's most visited region. In 2023 alone, it welcomed 700 million international tourist arivals, accounting for 55% of global tourist arrivals (UNWTO, 2024). In 2025, international tourism continues its upward trajectory, with forecasts suggesting a further increase in international arrivals by 3–5%. This trend signals a full recovery to pre-pandemic levels and highlights the sector's resilience and long-term growth potential (UN Tourism 2025).

To analyze the structure of tourist expenditure across individual EU member states, the classification system outlined in the *International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics* (United Nations 2010) was applied. This system categorizes expenditures based on tourists' country of residence and travel destination. According to this classification, significant differences emerge among EU countries in terms of preferences for domestic versus international travel, as illustrated in Figure 2. The highest proportions of expenditure on international travel were recorded in Luxembourg (98%), Malta (91%), and Belgium (90%). In contrast, residents of Romania, Greece, and Spain allocated the majority of their tourism expenditures to domestic travel - 75%, 73%, and 66%, respectively. Notably, intra-EU tourism accounted for 93% of all tourism activity within the EU, with 73% attributed to domestic travel and 20% to trips to other member states (Eurostat 2025). These figures not only reflect the high level of integration within the EU tourism market, but also highlight the strong mobility of its residents, laying a solid foundation for continued growth and development of the sector.

Figure 2. Percentage of Residents' Tourist Expenditure on Domestic and International Travel in 2023



Source: own presentation based on data provided by Eurostat (2025).

For an effective analysis of the tourism sector, it is essential to understand the diverse motivations of travelers and the increasing specialization within the industry. The classification proposed by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2019), a specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for global tourism policy, reflects this growing complexity. One of the most commonly identified categories is leisure tourism, which includes beach holidays, weekend getaways, and short nature-based trips. Rural tourism is also gaining popularity, encompassing activities such as connecting with nature, learning about agricultural traditions, fishing, visiting local landmarks, and engaging in the daily life of rural communities. Another key category is cultural tourism, centered on experiencing both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, such as art, architecture, traditions, local cuisine, music and participation in artistic events. A distinct and rapidly expanding segment is health tourism, which is typically divided into medical and wellness tourism. Medical tourism involves travel for treatment, diagnosis, or rehabilitation, while wellness tourism focuses on preventive care and promoting healthy lifestyles. Given the aging population and rising healthcare costs in many developed countries, this sector holds substantial growth potential. Pilgrimage tourism, a unique form of travel associated with visiting religious destinations such as Lourdes, Santiago de Compostela, and Częstochowa, also plays a significant role. Business tourism, which combines professional activities with leisure opportunities, such as attending conferences, trade fairs and business meetings that include recreational components, is another dynamic and growing area. Educational tourism is also expanding, driven by the desire to acquire new knowledge and skills. This includes language courses, school and university exchanges, specialized training programs, and academic field trips. Additionally, ecotourism has gained prominence as a form of sustainable tourism that emphasizes responsible interaction with both biological and cultural diversity (UNWTO, 2019).

The diversity of these tourism forms reflects the evolving needs, lifestyles, and values of contemporary societies, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of modern tourism. In the context of the sector's growing significance to the global economy, increasing competition, and shifting consumer expectations, analyzing the factors influencing the level and structure of tourism expenditures enables the development of more effective policies. These policies can optimize revenue, support sustainable growth, and foster meaningful tourism experiences that respect local environments and cultures (Mudarra-Fernández et all. 2018).

1.1 Economic Factors Affecting Tourist Expenditure

Decisions to engage in tourism, as well as the level of tourism-related expenditures, are strongly influenced by economic factors operating at both the microeconomic and macroeconomic levels. Key determinants of household consumption in this context include income levels, financial stability, occupational status, and the value of owned assets, commonly referred to as the wealth effect. At the same time, macroeconomic factors such as inflation, unemployment rates, and changes in fiscal policy significantly affect overall willingness to spend on discretionary goods and services, including tourism. These relationships are supported by both economic theory and empirical research (OECD 2020; Hall *et al.* 2021). Accordingly, periods of economic growth and improvements in material living conditions, particularly in highly developed countries, are typically accompanied by a marked increase in tourism expenditures (OECD, 2020).

The strong relationship between income levels and tourism expenditures is well-documented in empirical research. For instance, Massidda et all. 2022) found that tourists with middle and high incomes spend, on average, 21.4% and 46.2% more, respectively, than those with low incomes. Similarly, unemployed individuals spend approximately 34.2% less on tourism than those who are economically active. These findings align with Milton Friedman's (1957) permanent income hypothesis, which suggests that stability and predictability of income sources encourage greater consumption of discretionary goods, such as tourism.

The role of socioeconomic status in influencing tourism participation is further supported by Chen et all. (2021), who demonstrate that both income and education levels are significantly associated with the amount of tourism expenditure. Labor market status also plays a crucial role in determining not only the likelihood of participating in tourism but also the level of expenditure. Households in which the primary earner is out of the labor force are less likely to engage in tourist activities. In contrast, individuals with high occupational prestige are more likely to travel, particularly internationally, due to greater job security, access to paid leave, and generally higher levels of social protection, especially in highly developed countries (Bernini, Cracolici 2015). Higher levels of human and material capital are linked not only to more frequent travel but also to a preference for higher-quality services.

Chulaphana and Barahona (2021) also emphasize that increases in income and the positive reputation of a destination, often shaped by word-of-mouth recommendations, can significantly raise the average per capita level of tourist expenditure. The authors further highlight the influence of external factors such as relative prices in

competing destinations, noting that higher prices in alternative locations may encourage greater expenditure within a given country. Conversely, high local prices and elevated levels of corruption serve as deterrents, reducing the overall value of tourism consumption.

In the microeconomic context, the so-called "wealth effect", defined as the impact of rising asset values, particularly real estate, on consumer behavior also plays an important role. As noted by Chen *et al.* (2021), in regions with relatively low income levels but rapid increases in property values, tourism expenditure may rise despite modest household income, illustrating the complex relationship between perceived wealth and consumer decision-making.

Tourist expenditure is influenced by both microeconomic determinants, such as income levels, occupational status, and the value of owned assets and macroeconomic factors, including gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, inflation, unemployment rates, and exchange rates. A high level of GDP per capita supports the development of tourism by increasing consumers' purchasing power (Cho, 2001), whereas a high unemployment rate,particularly in developed countries, tends to reduce the propensity to travel.

Research by Martins et all. (2017) highlights the varying importance of specific macroeconomic factors depending on a country's level of economic development. In high-income countries, global GDP per capita has the greatest influence on tourism demand, whereas in lower-income countries, relative prices (*i.e.*, the price differences between countries) play a more dominant role. In these lower-income economies, price fluctuations and exchange rate volatility exert a stronger impact on tourist expenditure. Moreover, price elasticity is significantly higher in these countries: on average, a price increase leads to a 3.7% decrease in tourism expenditure, compared to only 1.7% in high-income countries (Martins et all. 2017). These findings underscore the importance of tailoring tourism policies to reflect regional and income-related economic conditions.

As Kaczmarska (2014) notes, the development of the tourism sector is closely tied not only to the general economic condition but also to broader structural and cultural changes. She emphasizes that, in addition to real income growth, a more equitable distribution of income plays a critical role, enabling individuals to first meet their basic needs and, subsequently, pursue higher-order needs such as tourism participation. One widely used measure of income inequality is the Gini coefficient, which indicates how far a country's income distribution deviates from perfect equality. A value of 0 represents complete equality, meaning everyone receives the same income, while a value of 100 indicates maximum inequality, meaning all income is concentrated in the hands of a single individual (Eurostat, 2025). According to Eurostat (2025), the average Gini coefficient in EU countries in 2023 was 29.6. The highest levels of income inequality were recorded in Bulgaria (37.2), Lithuania (35.7), and Latvia (34.0), while the lowest levels (below 25) were observed in Slovakia, Slovenia, Belgium, and the Czech Republic. Another indicator closely tied to tourism is the proportion of the population that cannot afford a one-week vacation away from home. In 2023, this share averaged 28.5% across the European Union, dropping to just 11% in countries such as Luxembourg, but exceeding 40% in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Greece. These statistics highlight the persistent economic barriers to tourism in many member countries and underscore the importance of policies aimed at making the sector more inclusive.

Macroeconomic crises, including recessions, economic slowdowns, and global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, also have a profound impact on tourism expenditure. As noted by Hall *et al.* (2021), crises of this nature typically result in a decline in tourism activity due to falling incomes, financial uncertainty, and changing consumption preferences. Moreover, the pandemic exposed the structural vulnerability of the tourism sector to economic shocks and prompted a broader discussion about the need to reshape tourism development toward greater resilience and sustainability. According to Hall *et al.* (2021), without targeted policy and institutional interventions, there is a risk of reverting to an unsustainable model centered on cheap, mass travel, which could intensify the long-term economic and environmental consequences of tourism.

1.2 Demographic Factors Affecting Tourist Expenditure

The demographic structure of society is a key determinant of both the propensity to travel and the nature of tourism-related expenditures. Demographic analysis should be an integral component of market research and strategic planning for tourism sector development, particularly in the context of ongoing social changes and aging populations in developed countries (Bernini, Cracolici 2015; Chen at al. 2021). Variables such as age, education, occupational status, nationality, and place of residence, all play a significant role in shaping the profiles of tourism consumers and their expenditure preferences.

Age is one of the most frequently studied factors influencing travel consumption patterns (Bernini, Cracolici 2015). According to Eurostat (2025), individuals aged 55–64 recorded the highest average travel expenditure in 2023 (€524), while the 15–24 age group spent the least on average (€385). However, as Gómez-

Déniz and Pérez-Rodríguez (2019) argue, age does not act independently. Its impact is strongly mediated by other variables, such as occupational status, income level, and length of stay. Their regression analysis reveals that both age and employment status have a positive and statistically significant effect on tourism expenditures, with older and economically active individuals expenditure more. Additionally, their findings indicate that the youngest and oldest age cohorts are more sensitive to income changes, as fluctuations in income are more directly reflected in changes in tourism expenditure within these groups. In contrast, middle-aged individuals tend to display more stable consumption patterns in this respect.

Despite this income sensitivity, older adults demonstrate greater price flexibility. Owing to their greater availability of time, they are more inclined to take longer trips and are less affected by seasonal price fluctuations. Their purchasing decisions are often driven more by the availability and convenience of travel services than by price alone (Alegre, Pou, 2006). Consequently, while their total expenditure is still influenced by income, older travelers tend to plan and execute their trips more strategically and with less impulsiveness than younger individuals. In this context, length of stay, which is closely correlated with the level of expenditure, emerges as a crucial component of consumption patterns (Chen *et al.* 2021).

Bernini and Cracolici (2015) also emphasize the role of cohort effects. Older adults today are more likely to engage in tourism than previous generations at the same age, with motivations often tied to quality of life, health, and cultural engagement. This underscores the need to design tourism products tailored specifically to the needs and preferences of seniors. Recent Eurostat data (2025) further supports this, showing that, despite an overall decline in the number of tourist trips across the European Union, the 55+ age group was the only one to experience an increase in travel in 2023 compared to 2019. Although individuals aged 65 and older still account for a relatively small share of total tourism, they represented as many as 46 million tourists in 2023. However, it is worth noting that over half of Europeans in this age group did not travel at all during the same year, highlighting ongoing financial, health-related, and infrastructural barriers.

Education level remains one of the strongest predictors of both tourism participation and expenditure. Individuals with higher education levels tend to be more open to new experiences, travel more frequently, and generate higher expenditures (Bernini, Cracolici, 2015). This is attributable to a combination of factors, including greater cultural awareness, better access to information, and generally higher income and professional status. Marrocu at al. (2015) confirm that individuals with stable employment and high incomes are more likely to engage in high-standard tourism, thereby contributing more substantially to the tourism economy.

Nationality is another critical factor influencing tourism behavior. Cultural and economic diversity shapes not only the level of expenditure but also preferences for destinations and types of leisure activities (Bernini, Cracolici 2015; Brida, Scuderi 2013). Similarly, place of residence plays an important role, particularly among lower-income groups, where disparities in tourism infrastructure, travel costs, and regional cultural norms may contribute to significant differences in expenditure patterns (Chen at al. 2021).

Nevertheless, as noted by Duran-Román *et al.* (2020), variables like gender and education level do not consistently demonstrate statistical significance in every analytical model. This suggests the importance of contextual interpretation, taking into account regional characteristics, travel types, and specific tourist segments. Microeconomic analysis also shows that not all demographic variables carry the same weight across different quantiles of the expenditure distribution (Chen *et al.* 2021), reinforcing the complexity of consumer behavior in the tourism market.

1.3 Travel-Related Factors Affecting Tourist Expenditure

The literature on tourism expenditure highlights several travel-related variables, such as length of stay, size and composition of the travel group, previous tourism experience, mode of transportation, destination, purpose of travel, and form of service reservation (Brida, Scuderi 2013; Marrocu *et al.* 2015). One factor that positively and significantly influences the level of tourist expenditure is the length of stay, typically measured by the number of days or nights spent at a destination (Brida, Scuderi 2013). Importantly, this increase tends to be inelastic, meaning that as the length of stay grows, expenditure rises, but at a rate disproportionate to the number of days (Engström, Kipperberg 2015).The purpose of the trip also plays a crucial role in differentiating expenditure levels,which travelers who visit a single destination tend to spend more compared to those who embark on multi-destination trips. Additionally, travel experience serves as a predictor of expenditure, with first-time visitors statistically spending more than repeat tourists (Alegre, Cladera 2010). Active participation in various leisure activities such as cultural events, sports, or dining out systematically increases total expenditure (Engström, Kipperberg 2015).

Travel expenditure is additionally affected by factors associated with trip organization. The size of the travel group interacts with expenditure patterns. Larger groups often benefit from lower per capita costs, which can reduce average individual expenditure, particularly for budget travelers. Advance bookings, opting for organized packages, and choosing high-quality accommodations are associated with higher total costs. In contrast, tourists who opt for more economical accommodations or alternative transportation methods, such as hitchhiking or public transit, generally incur lower expenditures (Marrocu *et al.* 2015).

Analyses show less conclusive results for variables such as seasonality, distance between residence and destination, timing of trip planning, and visitor type. The influence of these factors often depends on the local context of the study as well as the profile of the tourist (Brida, Scuderi 2013). Some variables, including length of stay and number of places visited, affect both the level and structure of expenditure, whereas others impact only one of these aspects (Marrocu *et al.* 2015).

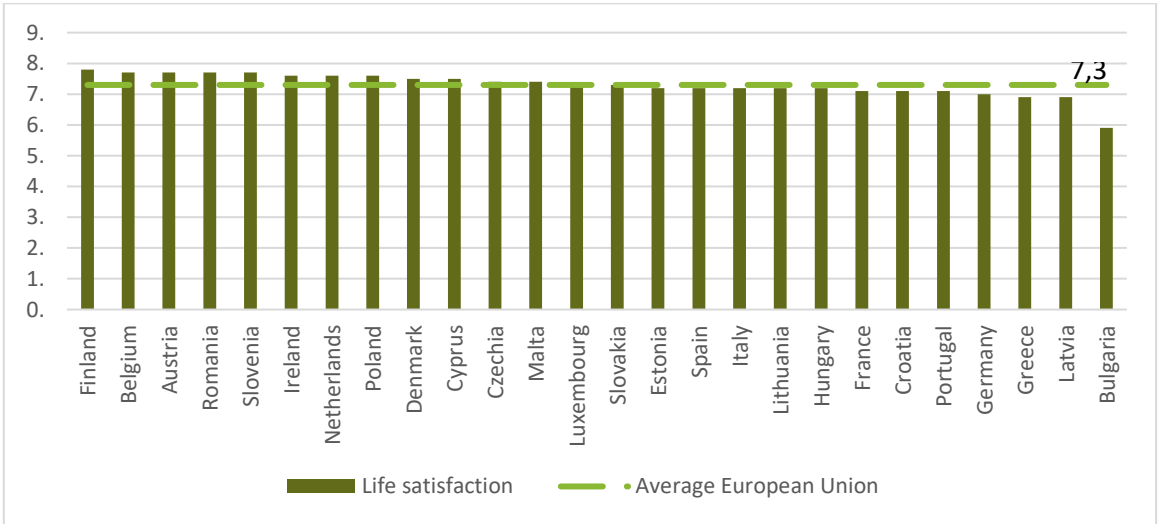
More comprehensive technical and environmental considerations also merit attention. The development of transportation and tourism infrastructure throughout the 20th and 21st centuries has significantly enhanced travel comfort, expanding the range and accessibility of destinations. Simultaneously, increasing tourism pressure on the environment has driven the adoption of sustainable development principles, which in turn have shaped tourism policies in many countries (Kaczmarska 2014).

1.4 Psychographic Factors Affecting Tourist Expenditure

Psychographic factors such as lifestyle, self-esteem, attitudes, values, and interests play a significant role in shaping consumer behavior in the tourism sector, including both the level and structure of tourist expenditures. Although these factors are more difficult to measure than traditional demographic or economic variables, an increasing number of studies confirm their substantial influence on tourism-related decisions (Brida and Scuderi 2013).

One key psychographic determinant of tourist expenditure is the subjective sense of satisfaction. Due to the complex and imprecise nature of this concept, D'Urso *et al.* (2020) proposed the use of fuzzy modeling techniques to better capture its uncertainty. As noted by Mudarra-Fernández *et al.* (2018), satisfaction levels influence tourists' willingness to participate in various activities offered at their destinations, particularly in the context of cultural tourism. Additionally, recommendations and reviews from other travelers play a crucial role by enhancing trust in the destination and its services, thereby increasing the willingness to spend (Chulaphana, Barahona 2021). In this context, it is useful to consider data on overall life satisfaction in European Union countries. As reported by Eurostat (2024), in 2023 the average life satisfaction in the EU stood at 7.3 out of 10, indicating the overall quality of life experienced by residents. This score varies depending on factors like age, education level, and individual or financial situations. Figure 3 illustrates that 15 of the 26 EU member countries recorded satisfaction levels equal to or above the EU average. Finland topped the ranking with a score of 7.8, while Belgium, Austria, Romania, and Slovenia followed closely with 7.7. On the lower end, Bulgaria reported the least satisfaction at 5.9, and both Latvia and Greece scored 6.9 (Eurostat 2024).

Figure 3. Levels of Life Satisfaction Among Residents of European Union Countries



Source: own presentation based on data provided by Eurostat (2025)

Traveler motivations, cultural preferences, and lifestyles, while challenging to incorporate explicitly into classical economic models, offer significant explanatory potential. Households that place greater importance on cultural and recreational experiences are more likely to allocate resources to travel. Growing environmental awareness and the pursuit of sustainable lifestyles have also increased interest in environmentally friendly forms of tourism (Massida *et al.* 2022). It is noteworthy that tourists who prioritize natural attractions spend on average 16.6 percent more, while those who value gastronomy spend up to 25 percent more than travelers for whom these aspects are less important. Furthermore, tourists motivated by comfort and relaxation, such as those taking sun and beach vacations, tend to have higher expenditure levels than those traveling for educational purposes or with budget constraints (Marrocu *et al.* 2015).

An example that highlights the influence of individual preferences is Thrane's (2002) study, which found that jazz festival attendees with a strong interest in music spent significantly more than other participants, both on concerts and additional attractions. Accommodation quality is equally important. Alegre and Cladera (2010) demonstrated that tourists motivated by high accommodation standards are more likely to revisit the same destination, emphasizing the critical role of quality in fostering tourist loyalty.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the development of tourism as a sector is closely linked to broader socio-economic phenomena. Cultural changes, reduced working hours, the expansion of paid vacations, as well as increasing cosmopolitanism and globalization, contribute to the growth in demand for tourism services and the diversification of consumption preferences (Kaczmarska 2014). Social and psychological factors, which evolve alongside societal development, shape not only motivations but also specific expenditure patterns, making psychographic analysis a key component of contemporary tourism economics.

2. Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to identify the socio-economic determinants influencing the level of tourism expenditure in European Union member countries. This analysis adopts the per capita tourism expenditure index as a representative measure of tourism activity, as it adjusts for population size and thus facilitates comparisons across countries with varying demographic sizes. Tourism expenditures are defined, according to Eurostat (2025), as the total expenditures on transportation, accommodation, catering, and other travel-related services, excluding durable goods and valuables.

This analysis draws on data from cyclical household budget surveys conducted by Eurostat, which provide a high degree of comparability across EU member countries, as well as consistent methodology and broad data availability. Accordingly, the analysis includes 26 of the 27 European Union countries, with Sweden excluded due to the unavailability of complete data. The analysis is based on data of 2023, which is considered representative due to the stabilization of the socio-economic situation following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the hypothesis, the determinants influencing the level of per capita tourism expenditure (measured by the HR indicator) vary depending on the degree of a country's economic and cultural development. To examine this variation, countries were divided into two groups. The first group (EU-9) includes countries with an average GDP per capita above the EU average: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland, Malta, and Luxembourg. The second group (EU-17) consists of countries with a GDP per capita below the EU average: Czechia, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, and Cyprus.

Based on a review of the relevant literature, a set of variables potentially influencing the level of tourist expenditure in the analyzed countries was selected. A detailed description of these variables is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Analyzed Variables

Variable	Variable description
HR	Tourism expenditure per capita is an economic indicator that measures the average tourism-related expenditure per individual in a given country. It is calculated by dividing the total national tourism expenditure by the country's total population.
WG	The Gini coefficient measures the extent to which the distribution of income within a country deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. A coefficient of zero expresses perfect equality where everyone has the same income, while a coefficient of ten expresses full inequality where only one person has all the income.
SW	The indicator is the natural logarithm of the median age of the population, calculated based on Eurostat data. The median age represents the average age of the population, and its natural logarithm enables better analysis of demographic changes and international comparisons.

Variable	Variable description
CP	The annual average rate of change of the HICP represents the percentage change in the average level of consumer prices from one year to the next, that is, year-over-year inflation, calculated based on the annual average values of the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP).
LS	Life satisfaction is a self-reported measure of well-being, reflecting an individual's overall assessment of their life as a whole. It is typically measured on a scale from zero (not at all satisfied) to ten (completely satisfied), based on responses to survey questions. Life satisfaction is influenced by various personal and contextual factors, such as age, income, employment status, health, and social relationships.
UR	The percentage of people living in predominantly rural areas. A predominantly rural area is defined as one where more than 50% of the population resides in areas classified as rural. That is, where population density does not exceed 150 inhabitants per km² (Zysk; Źróbek-Różańska 2015). Data for Malta were estimated based on information from the National Statistics Office (NSO) Malta. For Luxembourg, estimates were based on data from the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg (STATEC), applying criteria of population density below 300 inhabitants per km² and fewer than 5,000 residents in the area. For Cyprus, the source of data was the Statistical Service of Cyprus (CYSTAT).
DR	The GDP per capita index, expressed in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS), is presented relative to the European Union average, which is set at 1. If a country's index exceeds 1, it indicates that its GDP per capita is above the EU average; if the index is below 1, it means the GDP per capita is lower than the EU average. Data expressed in PPS, a common currency unit, allow for cross-country comparisons by eliminating price level differences, enabling a more accurate analysis of GDP volumes.
WW	The percentage of individuals with an education level above upper secondary education, tertiary education (levels 5–8), includes a variety of learning pathways such as bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs, as well as various vocational and technical courses at the higher education level. This classification is based on the International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011

Source: Eurostat (2025)

The proposed model was estimated using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method in the GRETL environment (version 2025a), and the robustness of the results was assessed through a series of diagnostic tests. Heteroskedasticity was initially tested using the White test; when the number of observations was insufficient to account for all interaction terms, a squares-only variant was applied. This analysis was further complemented by Breusch-Pagan tests, with heteroskedasticity-robust HC1 standard errors reported. The normality of the error terms was evaluated using the Doornik-Hansen test.

3. Research Results

To examine the impact of determinants on tourism expenditure levels in countries with varying socio-economic development, the following model was proposed and estimated using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method. Based on the literature review, the cross-sectional model takes the form (see equation 1):

$$HR_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot WG_i + \beta_2 \cdot SW_i + \beta_3 \cdot CP_i + \beta_4 \cdot LS_i + \beta_5 \cdot UR_i + \beta_6 \cdot DR_i + \beta_7 \cdot WW_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where the explained variable HR represents tourism expenditure per capita. The explanatory variables are listed in the Table 1. β_0, β_1,…,β_7 are the structural parameters and ε_i is the error term.

The research findings are summarized in Tables 2 and 3. For the EU-9 group (see Table 2), the model was initially estimated with several variables, some of which did not reach statistical significance at the 0.1 level. Only statistically significant variables are shown in the Tables.

The model demonstrates a strong fit, that approximately 91% of the variance in per capita tourism expenditure is explained by the model. Due to an insufficient number of degrees of freedom, the standard White test for heteroskedasticity could not be applied. Instead, a simplified version based solely on the squared fitted values was used, which did not indicate any issues with heteroskedasticity ($p = 0.342$). This finding was further supported by the Breusch - Pagan test ($p = 0.449$). Coefficient standard errors were estimated using the HC1 heteroskedasticity-robust correction. Table 2 shows that four variables were statistically significant at the 0.05 level: WG (Gini Index), SW (the natural logarithm of the median age of the population), LS (life satisfaction), and CP (Consumer Price Index).The results indicate that SW (45748,6) has the largest positive impact on tourism expenditure per capita, followed by WG, CP, and LS. Specifically, WG (27592.7) shows a positive effect, suggesting that higher income inequality is associated with increased tourism expenditure per capita in this group of countries. SW's positive coefficient indicates that countries with an older median population tend to spend

more on tourism per capita. Similarly, CP and LS also positively influence tourism expenditure, with CP having the highest level of statistical significance among the four variables.

Table 2. Estimates of the model for the EU-9 group

Variable	Parameter
const	-207,494**
WG	27,592.7*
SW	45,748,6**
LS	3,144.55**
DR	5,521.61***
Determination coeff. R^2	0.912
Doornik-Hansen test stat. (p-value)	0.895

Source: own estimation.

The results presented concern the second group of EU countries Czechia, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, Cyprus (EU-17), as defined earlier in the study. After estimating the model, it turned out that three structural parameters were statistically significant at the 0.1 significance level. After removing non-significant parameters, the final form of the model was obtained, and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Estimates of the model for the EU-17 group

Variable	Parameter
const	19,367.3*
SW	-5,652.15**
DR	2,006.53**
WW	3,434.83**
Determination coeff. R^2	0.730
Doornik-Hansen test stat. (p-value)	0.122

Source: own estimation.

The model demonstrates an explanatory power accounting for approximately 73% of the variation in tourism expenditure. This indicates that the chosen variables collectively provide a robust framework for explaining differences in tourism expenditures across countries. The White test for heteroskedasticity fails to reject the null hypothesis of homoscedasticity (LM statistic = 10.2613, p = 0.3297), indicating that the variance of the residuals is constant across observations. Similarly, the normality test for the error terms does not provide sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that the error terms are normally distributed (Chi-square (2) = 4.20995, p = 0.1218).

The regression results indicate that three variables are statistically significant at the 0.05 level: SW (the natural logarithm of the median age), DR (GDP per capita), and WW (the proportion of the population with higher education). The coefficient for SW is negative (-5652.15), suggesting that an increase in the median age is associated with a decrease in tourism expenditure per capita. In contrast, DR has a positive coefficient (2006.53), indicating that higher GDP per capita corresponds to increased tourism expenditure. Similarly, WW exhibits a positive effect (3434.83), meaning that countries with a larger share of individuals with higher education tend to have higher tourism expenditure per capita.

4. Discussions

The analysis of the determinants of tourism expenditure levels in European Union countries revealed clear differences between countries with high and low GDP per capita, measured relative to the EU average. The findings support the hypothesis that the structure of factors influencing tourism consumption depends on a country's level of economic development. This study contributes to the broader field of economic research on

consumer behavior, offering a novel perspective that incorporates historical and geographical context, as well as the heterogeneous economic advancement in Europe..

According to Eurostat data (2025), only nine EU member countries have a GDP per capita above the EU average (EU-9), while seventeen fall below this threshold (EU-17). This disparity results in variation in the factors influencing tourism expenditure. In EU-9 countries, higher tourism expenditure is associated with greater income, higher median age, increased life satisfaction, and, perhaps unexpectedly, greater income inequality measured by the Gini coefficient. In lower-income countries, education and income positively affect tourism expenditure, whereas median age negatively impacts it, as older population in these countries tends to demonstrate reduced engagement in tourism-related activities.

The study confirms a positive relationship between GDP per capita and tourism expenditure (Massidda *et al.* 2022). An increase in national income tends to stimulate higher levels of tourism consumption, regardless of a country's historical political background or geographical location. Research by Chulaphan and Barahona (2021) also demonstrates that the accumulation of material assets and income stability influence the propensity to consume. In countries with sustained economic growth, specifically among the EU-9 member countries, the findings support Friedman's (1957) hypothesis that income predictability and stability play a critical role in shaping consumption behavior, particularly with regard to non-essential goods such as tourism. Similarly, Cho (2001) argues that a higher GDP per capita enhances purchasing power, thereby supporting increased tourism activity.

In countries with a GDP per capita above the European Union average, higher levels of income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, are associated with greater tourism expenditure. This may be explained by the fact that a relatively small segment of the population is responsible for disproportionately high levels of tourist expenditure, thereby raising the national average. In contrast, this variable is not statistically significant in the EU-17 countries, which may result from generally lower income levels and a smaller proportion of high-income individuals within the overall population.

The demographic structure also represents a significant influence on tourism expenditure. In EU-9 countries, a higher median age is positively associated with increased spending on tourism. This relationship can be attributed to the fact that older individuals in these countries generally possess greater financial security, including stable income sources, accumulated savings, and more discretionary time. Conversely, in EU-17 countries, older populations often face structural disadvantages such as limited access to social welfare, lower pension levels, reduced savings, and greater dependence on familial support. These conditions constrain their ability to participate in tourism-related activities.

Substantial disparities are also evident in the influence of educational attainment on tourism expenditure. Prior research (Bernini, Cracolici 2015; Marrocu *et al.* 2015) indicates that individuals with higher levels of education exhibit a greater propensity to engage in travel, demonstrate a preference for higher-quality services, and display increased openness to cultural experiences. The present analysis confirms this association in countries where GDP per capita falls below the EU average. In contrast, within the EU-9 group, the relationship between educational attainment and tourism expenditure is less pronounced, which may be attributed to the broader accessibility of tourism opportunities across different segments of the population.

Among the psychographic determinants, life satisfaction constitutes a significant factor. This association has been explored in prior studies by D'Urso *et al.* (2020) as well as Mudarra-Fernández *et al.* (2018). Their findings indicate that elevated levels of life satisfaction are positively correlated with greater participation in various activities, including tourism, especially within the domain of cultural travel. The present study confirms the impact of this variable on tourism expenditure in the EU-9 countries, whereas no statistically significant effect was identified within the EU-17 group.

Conclusions and Further Research

This study makes significant contributions to the tourism sector through its interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from economics, demography, sociology, and geography. The analysis reveals pronounced disparities among European Union countries, which stem from both historical legacies and current socio-economic development levels. For example, countries such as Greece, Spain, Italy, and Portugal, despite their well-developed tourism infrastructure, have not achieved the level of economic convergence anticipated within the EU framework. Similarly, post-communist countries continue to confront challenges linked to systemic transformation. These factors contribute to their relatively lower levels of tourism activity. In contrast, Western and Northern European countries, benefiting from more substantial economic resources, generate higher levels of tourism expenditure.

An analysis of GDP per capita levels across European Union member countries reveals substantial economic disparities. This indicator exceeds the EU average in only nine countries, while the remaining seventeen fall below this benchmark. Such inequality has a direct impact on both the level and accessibility of tourism participation among citizens. Consequently, it is essential for EU policies to focus not only on reducing these disparities between countries, but also on addressing inequalities at the regional and sub-regional levels, considering the diverse socio-economic conditions that characterize different areas of the Union. The findings of this study underscore the necessity of formulating differentiated strategies oriented towards supporting economically less developed regions in achieving more equitable participation in the European tourism market. Moreover, the research provides empirical evidence that the structure of determinants influencing tourism expenditure varies considerably between the two country groups. Therefore, a uniform tourism policy across the European Union is unlikely to be effective. These insights offer valuable implications for the future orientation of EU tourism policy, emphasizing the importance of adopting a flexible, context-sensitive approach to strategic planning and implementation. Policy should be adapted to the specific economic, social, and demographic characteristics of individual countries and regions.

Furthermore, particular attention should be devoted to the aging population, whose proportion within the EU demographic profile continues to increase. The health, social, and emotional requirements of this group increasingly shape tourism demand. Nonetheless, substantial barriers persist that limit seniors' access to tourism, including financial, infrastructural, and health-related challenges, especially in countries with lower GDP per capita. Psychographic factors are also assuming an increasingly role in tourism expenditure research. Studies indicate that higher satisfaction with travel experiences enhances the likelihood of additional expenditure, which holds important implications for marketing and product development

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that tourism, despite its contribution to economic growth, remains highly vulnerable to crises, as clearly demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is critical to implement tourism development strategies that are not only economically beneficial but also resilient and sustainable.

An integrated analytical approach that combines demographic, economic, and psychographic dimensions is becoming indispensable for designing effective tourism development strategies. A deeper understanding of the determinants of tourism expenditure facilitates the creation of more targeted and inclusive tourism offerings. These can be adopted to the specific requirements of diverse social groups, including older adults, low-income families, and younger professionals. Consequently, it is crucial to develop inclusive infrastructure and services that enable greater participation in the tourism sector.

In conclusion, the advancement of the tourism sector within the European Union should be grounded in the principles of sustainable growth, regional adaptation, and social inclusivity. Adherence to these principles will be essential for fostering a resilient and equitable tourism system that promotes equal opportunities and supports the economic stability of the European Union as a whole.

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Alicja Grzenkowicz is the sole author of this article and is responsible for all aspects of the research, including conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Use of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The author declares that she has used generative AI and AI assisted technologies in the writing process before submission, but only to improve the language and readability of her paper and with the appropriate disclosure.

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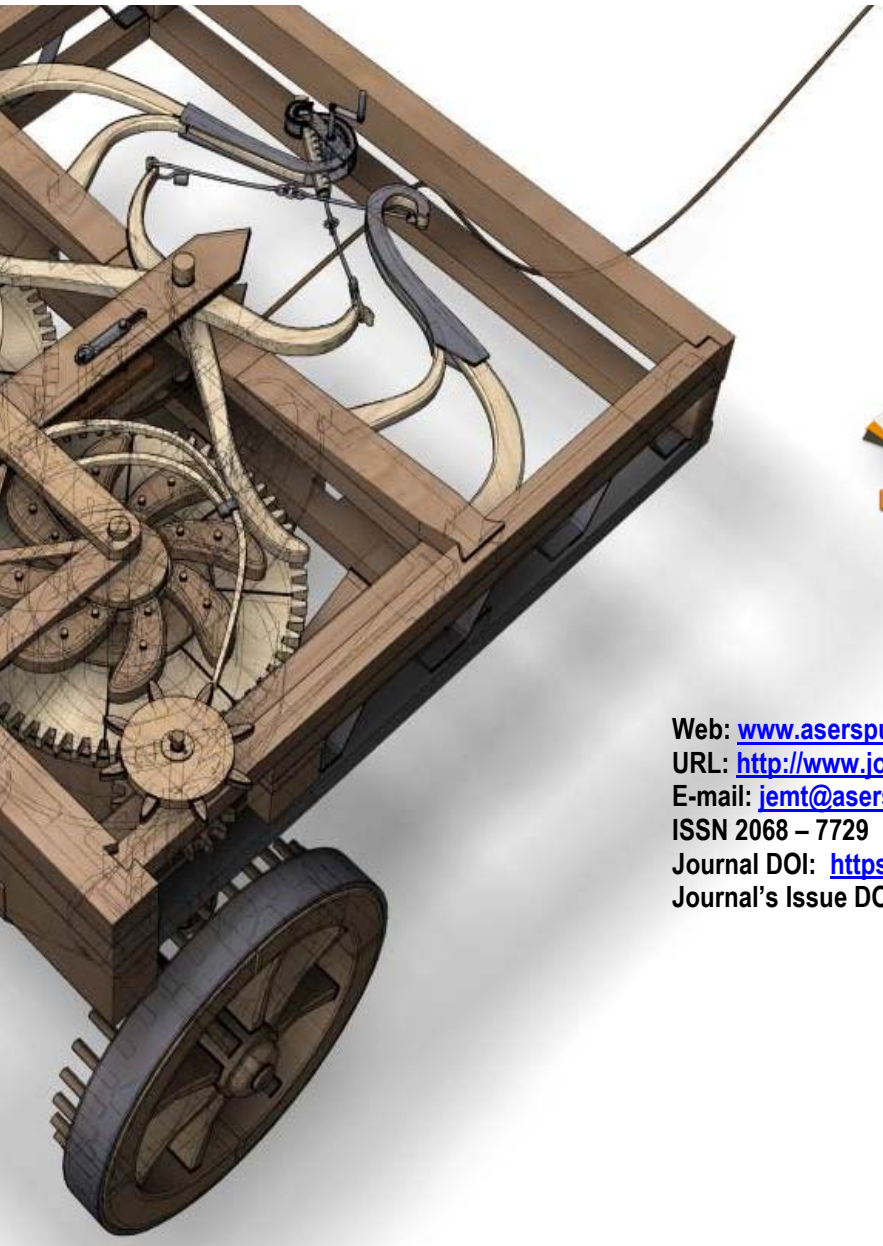

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