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DANTE AND CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN FLORENCE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Dante's legacy can support a responsible model of cultural entrepreneurship in Florence. It brings together scholarship on literary and cultural tourism, historical studies, and official documentation concerning the city's historic centre. It proposes a polycentric 'Dante Ecosystem' linking monuments, museums, bookshops, educational institutions, the performing arts, crafts, and digital services. The model is based on thematic routes, participatory experiences, evidence-based digital interpretation, and collaborative governance. The article concludes that the economic development of Dante's heritage can help diversify tourism in Florence only when it is tied to the protection of authenticity, resident participation, universal accessibility, and visitor-flow management.

Keywords: Dante Alighieri, Florence, Cultural Entrepreneurship, Literary Tourism, Cultural Heritage, Sustainable Development.

1 INTRODUCTION

Florence is an internationally recognised cultural destination whose medieval and Renaissance heritage forms an exceptionally coherent urban ensemble. Its historic centre was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1982. UNESCO describes it as the outcome of a long and continuous process of artistic creation, embodied in monuments, museums, streets, and historic economic activities (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). The city's dominant association with the Renaissance, however, often overshadows an earlier legacy: Florence's relationship with Dante Alighieri, the development of the Italian language, and the political conflicts of the medieval city.

Dante was born in Florence in 1265, took part in its public life, and was exiled in 1302 (Santagata, 2012). His biography, the *Vita nova*, and above all the *Commedia* connect personal memory, political conflict, theology, and poetic imagination with identifiable places. The Baptistery of San Giovanni, the Badia Fiorentina, Santa Margherita dei Cerchi, Palazzo Vecchio, the Bargello, and Santa Croce can be read as nodes in a literary geography. The city is not merely the setting of the poet's life. It provides a spatial framework for understanding his work, while the work itself changes how visitors perceive the city.

This article explores how that relationship might be transformed into responsible cultural entrepreneurship. Its central question is which mechanisms could enable Dante's legacy to support sustainable services, employment, and new experiences without reducing it to superficial spectacle. The analysis draws on a critical review of scholarship on literary and cultural tourism, historical studies of Dante, and official documentation on management of the historic centre. This is a conceptual and proposal-oriented study. It neither evaluates existing businesses nor estimates demand; instead, it develops a framework for collaboration and assessment that can be tested empirically.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural entrepreneurship involves the creation of cultural, social, and economic value through artistic practices, narratives, and heritage assets. It is not synonymous with simple commercialisation. Cultural entrepreneurs translate collectively recognised meanings into products, services, or organisational forms while seeking legitimacy from communities, institutions, and markets. The systematic review by Dobрева and Ivanov (2020) shows that the field connects entrepreneurship with the cultural and creative industries, urban development, public policy, and the use of technology. Success therefore cannot be assessed solely through revenue or visitor numbers; indicators of learning, conservation, participation, and social benefit are also required.

Literary tourism is a distinct form of cultural tourism involving visits to places associated with authors' lives, the creation of literary works, fictional landscapes, or book-related events. Herbert (2001) argues that literary places derive their appeal from the encounter between material space and the imagination: visitors seek traces and evidence while also reconstructing the world of the text. Hoppen, Brown and Fyall (2014) examine different forms of literary tourism and stress that effective destination promotion requires cooperation among multiple stakeholders. Value therefore emerges from connections among places, texts, and experiences rather than from an isolated attraction.

Cultural consumption has gradually shifted from passive viewing towards participation, learning, and co-creation. Richards (2021) describes this change as an expansion of cultural tourism beyond monuments towards practices that connect visitors, creators, and residents. In Florence, this means that a Dante-themed product cannot be limited to adding information panels at popular sites. It must enable visitors to read, listen, explore, discuss, and create. Narrative can thus become an organisational infrastructure for small-scale experiences and partnerships.

3 METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

The study follows a qualitative, exploratory approach. Its evidence base includes Dante's primary works, historical studies, official information from cultural institutions, and UNESCO documentation on the historic centre. The secondary literature covers literary tourism, cultural entrepreneurship, destination branding, and digital cultural practices. Sources were examined along three dimensions: cultural and narrative value; the potential to convert that value into services and experiences; and the conditions required for sustainable management. The synthesis is used to formulate a normative model for action rather than to establish a causal relationship between Dante-related initiatives and economic outcomes.

Florence was selected as a case study because it combines an internationally recognisable literary figure, a dense network of monuments, and a mature tourism economy. That maturity makes both the opportunities and the risks of cultural entrepreneurship particularly visible. The study does not include interviews, field observation, or quantitative demand data. The proposed actions therefore require testing through stakeholder mapping, visitor and resident research, and an economic feasibility study. The article's contribution is primarily synthetic: it connects literary heritage with entrepreneurship and sustainable destination management.

The study adopts a cautious position towards contested biographical narratives. Speculation is not treated as historical fact. It may, however, be presented as part of the poet's later reception when clearly identified as such. Distinguishing among evidence, probability, tradition, and legend is essential to an entrepreneurial model based on trust. Creative storytelling may dramatise the past, but it must not obscure the degree of historical certainty.

4 DANTE AS A CULTURAL RESOURCE FOR FLORENCE

Dante's value as a cultural resource rests on interconnected historical, literary, and linguistic dimensions. He was a citizen and political figure in medieval Florence, and his exile reflects the conflicts of the city-state (Santagata, 2012). His works achieved international influence, while *De vulgari eloquentia* demonstrates his systematic engagement with the vernacular as a medium of elevated expression (Alighieri, 2012). His posthumous reception also generated iconographic traditions, translations, public readings, and commemorative rituals extending far beyond Italy. Dante's cultural capital is therefore both local and international.

The spatial concentration of relevant sites enables the development of walkable experiences. The Baptistry—the ‘bel San Giovanni’ of the *Commedia*—connects the work with the poet’s religious and civic identity (Alighieri, 1994). The Badia Fiorentina and the Alighieri neighbourhood evoke his early environment; Palazzo Vecchio represents political power; and Santa Croce embodies both the cenotaph and Florence’s later claim to his memory. The Museo Casa di Dante presents the poet within the historical context of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Florence (Museo Casa di Dante, n.d.). These nodes could support different routes for schools, general visitors, and specialist literary audiences.

Interpretation of these sites requires care. The present Casa di Dante complex is a museum located in the area of the Alighieri family homes, but it cannot be presented without qualification as the poet’s intact birthplace. Similarly, many stories about Beatrice belong more to the history of reception than to secure biographical knowledge. Responsible interpretation distinguishes historical evidence from probability, tradition, and legend. This distinction does not reduce a place’s appeal; on the contrary, it can turn a visit into a process of historical inquiry, consistent with the complex meaning of authenticity at literary sites (Herbert, 2001; Santagata, 2012; Naldini, 2019).

5 A CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP ECOSYSTEM

Effective development of Dante’s legacy requires a network rather than a single product. The proposed ‘Dante Ecosystem’ could connect the municipality, museums, universities, libraries, schools, guides, publishers, technology firms, arts organisations, and craft workshops. A mixed coordinating body, including a scholarly committee and resident representation, could establish documentation standards, facilitate synergies, and distribute activities across space and time. Collaborative governance is particularly important in literary tourism because the final product is formed by multiple places and providers (Hoppen, Brown and Fyall, 2014).

The first pillar is a network of thematic routes. Instead of a single itinerary, routes could focus on Dante and politics, the *Vita nova* and Beatrice, language and the book, or the geography of exile. The last of these could digitally connect Florence with Lunigiana, Verona, and Ravenna. Differentiation would allow content to be adapted for schools, families, specialists, and international readers. Its effect on length of stay or repeat visits, however, must be tested empirically rather than assumed.

The second pillar consists of participatory creative experiences. Small businesses and cultural organisations could offer multilingual readings, calligraphy and bookbinding workshops, translation classes, illustration of selected passages, and musical or theatrical interpretations. These activities move visitors from observation towards participation, in line with the contemporary direction of creative tourism (Richards, 2021). Collaboration with historic workshops could also connect literary narrative with the continuity of local crafts, which UNESCO recognises as part of the historic centre’s authenticity (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

The third pillar comprises events and networks. An annual programme could combine public readings, theatre, music, visual arts, and discussions, with activities in both the monumental centre and neighbourhood libraries. Its international dimension could be developed through translators, Italian cultural institutes, and partnerships with cities associated with Dante’s exile. To avoid isolated spectacle, events should form part of a stable annual plan with transparent funding and evaluation. A share of revenue could support school programmes, conservation activities, and small grants for creators.

The fourth pillar is the use of existing infrastructure. The Firenzecard is already the city’s official pass and provides physical or digital access to more than sixty museums for 72 hours (Comune di Firenze, n.d.). A Dante-themed component could integrate small-group bookings, audio content, events, and partner bookshops or workshops without creating another stand-alone ticket. This approach could reduce entry costs for small organisations and promote lesser-known nodes. It would nevertheless require transparent conditions for participation and revenue distribution to prevent new forms of exclusion.

Comparative Models of Literary Parks and Festivals

European experience with literary parks offers a useful comparative model for Florence. In these models, literary heritage is organised as a spatial and productive network connecting places, narratives, cultural institutions, local businesses, and educational activities. Maniou et al. (2025e) present literary parks as forms of cultural tourism with an entrepreneurial dimension. For the Dante case, the central lesson is that a route requires a stable organisational structure, year-round continuity, and links with local production rather than merely a sequence of visitor stops.

Literary festivals can complement this permanent infrastructure. Maniou, Mitoula and Manola (2025c) connect literary events with cultural entrepreneurship and sustainable local development. Applying this model in Florence would require an annual programme distributing readings, workshops, performances, and educational activities across

different seasons and areas of the city. The festival would thereby strengthen a permanent partnership network rather than operate as a short-lived, self-contained event.

Neither approach can be transferred wholesale to Florence. These studies provide comparative examples but do not in themselves demonstrate that a 'Dante Ecosystem' would increase revenue, employment, or length of stay. They do, however, identify practical organisational principles: networking among multiple stakeholders, connecting permanent routes with periodic events, involving local businesses, and evaluating cultural and social effects. These principles could be tested through the pilot programme proposed in this study.

The Eugenio Montale Literary Park further strengthens the spatial dimension of the proposal. Maniou, Mitoula and Manola (2024) examine the relationship between the poet, specific places, routes, and local cultural activities as a form of cultural entrepreneurship. Similarly, research on Shakespeare's Italy shows how an internationally recognisable literary name can connect multiple Italian locations through a shared narrative (Maniou et al., 2024). In Florence, these examples support a network that extends beyond the Casa di Dante to connect different sites, works, and forms of participation.

Other Italian and Mediterranean cases provide complementary organisational insights. Studies of Cinecittà and Casa Malaparte examine how cinematic, architectural, and literary memory can be transformed into cultural experiences through partnerships, interpretation, and differentiated services (Maniou et al., 2025b; Maniou et al., 2025d). The study of Lesvos places greater emphasis on long-term development grounded in a destination's distinctive characteristics (Maniou et al., 2025a). These cases are not directly comparable with Florence, but they reinforce the need for local adaptation, institutional coordination, and impact assessment.

6 DIGITAL INNOVATION AND INTERPRETATION

Digital technology can connect the dispersed traces of Dante without replacing the experience of place. An open-architecture application could provide thematic maps, multilingual excerpts, audio interpretation, accessible routes, and content at different levels of depth. Augmented reality could selectively reconstruct the medieval appearance of a street or the spatial context of an event. Every digital item should display its source, degree of certainty, and editorial responsibility. Technology acquires cultural value when it facilitates access to knowledge rather than serving merely as an eye-catching wrapper.

The same infrastructure could support visitor-flow management. Anonymous, aggregated usage data, collected in compliance with data-protection legislation, could indicate which routes are selected and where congestion occurs. The application could recommend alternative times or less heavily visited nodes and provide content before and after the visit. Remote access to digital publications or workshops could generate income without adding physical pressure. These functions require pilot testing and clear usage indicators.

Digital and physical accessibility should be incorporated from the outset. Content should use plain language and provide subtitles, transcripts, audio description, adequate colour contrast, and alternative routes for people with mobility or sensory impairments. Brief introductions could make Dante's narrative accessible to audiences without prior literary education. Themes such as exile, political participation, language, and moral responsibility can bridge the work with contemporary concerns, provided that the connection is evidence-based and avoids anachronism.

7 SUSTAINABILITY AND GOVERNANCE

Entrepreneurial development in Florence must respect the limits of carrying capacity. UNESCO identifies mass tourism, traffic, air pollution, and population decline as threats to the historic centre (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). The success of a Dante-related initiative should therefore not be equated with increasing visits to already congested sites. It should distribute flows across different times, seasons, and areas, encourage walking, and create reasons to spend time beyond the most saturated monuments.

Resident participation is equally important. When narratives are designed exclusively for outside consumers, the city risks being treated as a stage set. Schools, local associations, universities, and professionals can co-create content and evaluate its effects. Governance requires public certification criteria, open calls for small businesses, fair remuneration for creators, and an accessible complaints mechanism. Economic returns gain social legitimacy when a share is reinvested in the community and in protecting the cultural resource.

Evaluation can be based on four categories of indicators. Economic indicators include revenue, local procurement, and employment. Cultural indicators examine the quality of documentation, participation in activities, and knowledge acquisition. Social indicators record access for residents and schools, accessibility, and neighbourhood satisfaction.

Environmental indicators monitor walking and the spatial and seasonal distribution of visits. Annual publication of results would support programme adjustment and make sustainability an accountable obligation.

8 DISCUSSION

The proposed strategy treats Dante as a system of relationships rather than an isolated commercial symbol. Florence's distinctive advantage lies in its ability to combine, within a compact area, text, language, political history, architecture, art, and contemporary creativity. This density can support complex experiences and collaboration among different professionals. Yet the international recognition of Dante's name also facilitates the production of standardised products. Governance must therefore protect historical complexity without making the experience inaccessible to wider audiences.

Commercial storytelling often favours certainty and easily understood myths, whereas historical knowledge contains gaps, contradictions, and later reconstructions. In Dante's case, this tension can be used pedagogically. Routes presenting different versions, workshops comparing manuscripts and translations, or applications indicating the strength of supporting evidence can cultivate critical reading. Authenticity need not be defined as a return to an unchanging past. It can be understood as a transparent relationship with evidence, communities, and the city's material traces.

The main risks are fragmentation among institutions, unequal access for small businesses, technological obsolescence, dependence on seasonal events, and the displacement of everyday uses from the city centre. Addressing them requires stable coordination, shared documentation standards, blended funding, and pilot implementation. An initial phase could include two routes, a limited number of certified partners, an educational programme, and a basic digital platform. After twelve months, predefined indicators would support an evidence-based decision to revise, expand, or discontinue the initiative.

Last but not least, we emphasize the significance of digital technologies in the educational domain and entrepreneurship training, which are very productive and successful, and how they facilitate and improve assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [19], various ICT applications that are the main supporters of education [20-23], and AI, STEM, and ROBOTICS that raise educational procedures to new performance levels [24-28]. Additionally, ICTs are being improved and combined with theories and models for cultivating emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and metacognition [29-33]. accelerates and further improves educational practices and results, especially in the entrepreneurial domain.

9 CONCLUSION

Dante's legacy can form the core of a contemporary cultural entrepreneurship strategy in Florence because it connects urban space with literature, language, political memory, and the experience of exile. This relationship can support thematic routes, educational and creative activities, digital services, events, and partnership networks with other cities. Potential beneficiaries include cultural organisations, guides, publishers, creators, technology firms, and historic workshops.

Its economic potential nevertheless depends on how cultural value is managed. Scholarly documentation, a clear distinction between fact and legend, resident participation, accessibility, fair distribution of benefits, and visitor-flow management are essential conditions for implementation. The 'Dante Ecosystem' provides a collaborative framework that preserves the autonomy of individual stakeholders, while a shared system of economic, cultural, social, and environmental indicators can strengthen accountability.

The challenge is not to exploit a recognizable name commercially, but to create meaningful ways of engaging with the city and Dante's work. Walking, reading, listening, discussion, and creative practice can transform heritage into an active knowledge resource. The effects on tourism diversification and the distribution of economic value must be tested through pilot data. The proposed strategy is sustainable only insofar as it does not exhaust cultural capital but invests in its conservation, interpretation, and public significance.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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