

---

## Differentiation as a Path to Development in a Natural Attraction: The Case of Chapala, Jalisco, México.

Dr. Arturo Laure Vidriales\*

MS. Laura Verónica Santana Gómez\*\*

Dr. Raúl Heredia Cerda\*\*\*

Dr. Carlos Salvador Gutiérrez Carrillo\*\*\*\*

---

---

### Keywords:

County development;  
Differentiation theory;  
Tourist attraction;  
Sustainable development;  
Social benefit.

---

This study explores how differentiation strategies, rooted in ecological, cultural, and community-based assets, can drive sustainable development in Chapala, Jalisco. Drawing on tourism theory, cultural resource management, and case studies from the region, we examine how this natural destination can reposition itself through unique offerings like retirement migration, cultural heritage, ecological tourism, and water-focused community development.

This paper examines how differentiation—focusing on unique ecological, cultural, and demographic assets—can lead to sustainable development.

The aim in this study, is to support the strongness attractions and actions to make this destination as a complement for the main purpose of visiting Guadalajara Metropolitan Area.

In the specific case of the Chapala County, Jalisco, Mexico, such support has become an urgent need. This county offers an alternative tourism product—nature tourism—which includes the largest lake in Mexico, making it distinct from the four traditional tourism products offered by the state: business tourism, sun and beach and religious.

Copyright © 2025 International Journals of  
Multidisciplinary Research Academy. All rights reserved.

---

### Author correspondence:

Dr. Arturo Laure Vidriales,  
Doctor in Tourism Development Program  
Malaga University, Spain  
Email: artlaure3@gmail.com

---

\* Doctorate Program, Tourism Development, University of Málaga, Spain

\*\* MBA Program, University of Guadalajara, México

\*\*\* Doctorate Program, Posgrade University Center, in Education, México

\*\*\*\* Doctorate Program, Mexican Institute of Higher Studies, in Learning Methodology, México

## 1. Introduction

Support for less favored regions is crucial in transforming them into drivers of development within their communities, resulting in improved well-being societies.

Chapala, located in Jalisco, is known for its natural beauty and Lake Chapala, the country's largest freshwater lake. Beyond its landscape, Chapala has emerged as a hub for international retirement migration and eco-cultural tourism. Chapala, a picturesque town located in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, is home to the country's largest freshwater lake, Lake Chapala. Known for its scenic beauty, mild climate, and biodiversity, Chapala has historically been a key attraction for both domestic and international visitors. In recent decades, the town has experienced a surge in international retirement migration, particularly from North America, which has transformed its economic and social landscape. Despite its natural appeal and economic influx, Chapala faces numerous challenges including environmental degradation, limited local economic diversification, and socio-cultural tensions stemming from rapid demographic shifts.

Seen these challenges, differentiation emerges as a strategic approach to enhance Chapala's appeal as a sustainable destination. This paper explores how differentiation—understood as the development of unique characteristics to stand out in a competitive market—can be harnessed to promote long-term, community-centered development in Chapala. Through a review of academic literature and regional case studies, we examine how ecological stewardship, cultural heritage preservation, and demographic uniqueness can serve as pillars for sustainable differentiation. However, mass tourism and unchecked development have threatened local ecosystems and community identity.

Chapala requires a comprehensive improvement plan to position itself as a key regional option in western Jalisco. It has reached a stage of maturity that necessitates transformation to avoid stagnation and decline, as described by Butler (1980) in his tourism destination lifecycle theory.

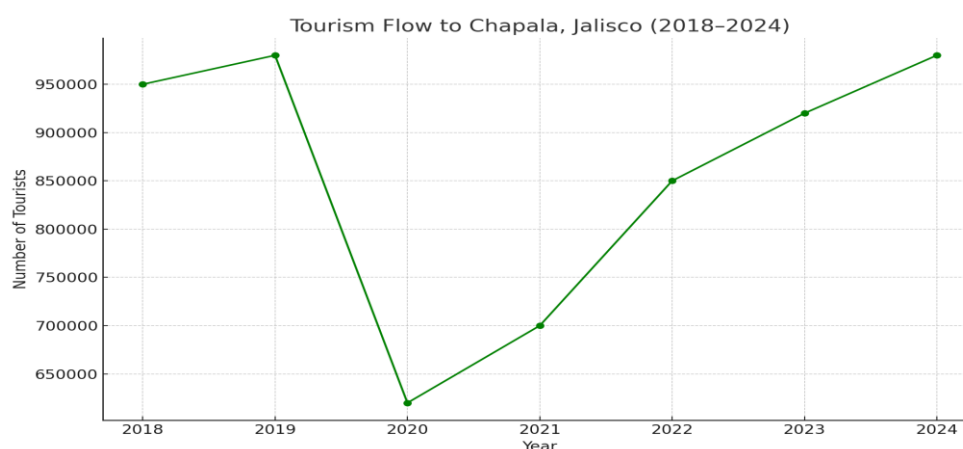
This paper proposes a development strategy for Chapala based on two pillars: differentiation (Porter, 2002) and destination rejuvenation (Butler, 1980), aiming to enhance its main public areas without altering its natural and architectural offerings.

Mexico's regional inequalities reflect the uneven benefits derived from national development initiatives and profound socioeconomic changes over the past two decades. To address this, it is essential to promote coordination mechanisms among various levels of government and strengthen institutional capacities, especially at the state and municipal levels. This includes enhancing public administration and investing in human resources to foster regional competitiveness. Key sectors such as agriculture and tourism must receive targeted support. Efforts should also ensure the necessary infrastructure, financial deepening, and innovative credit mechanisms particularly to lower remittance costs and channel them into productive investments.

The proposal in this study advocates supporting micro and small enterprises in the tourism sector through credit access at low-interest rates, prioritizing sustainability to secure integral development for future generations.

Integrating Chapala into the Pueblos Mágicos framework requires a holistic policy involving the local community, anticipating increased tourism. Sustainable development policies should meet economic, social, and aesthetic needs while preserving cultural integrity and ecological processes. This involves complex decision-making that balances social, economic, and environmental factors, requiring a broader vision than traditional community planning allows.

Chart 1. Tourism flow before and after COVID-19 in Chapala, Jalisco. (2018-2024)



Source: DATATUR 2024.

Table 1 shows how tourism was increasing in Chapala in 2018 and 2019 in great numbers but when COVID-19 hit in global matter Chapala was affected with the flow in a dramatic way; since this industry is recovering that by 2024 have the same numbers than in 2019.

### 1.1. Regional Development Policies in Mexico

Regional development planning is not a new topic; several presidential administrations have implemented such plans. Unfortunately, many have remained aspirational, with communities still lacking growth in key sectors like agriculture and tourism.

### 1.2. Conceptual Framework: Differentiation and Sustainable Tourism

Differentiation in tourism is the process of creating a distinctive identity for a destination. It relies on local culture, ecological uniqueness, or service models to avoid commodification and improve competitiveness (Andari et al., 2022). In Chapala, cultural heritage, water ecology, and retirement migration offer paths to differentiation.

Differentiation, in the context of tourism and regional development, refers to the process by which a destination leverages its unique ecological, cultural, or social assets to establish a distinctive identity in a competitive marketplace. This strategy aligns closely with the principles of sustainable tourism, which emphasize environmental conservation, socio-cultural integrity, and economic viability.

**Table 1. Porter's theory of competitive advantage, the differentiation strategy.**



Source: Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance (2002).

### **A sustainable differentiation approach integrates the three pillars of sustainability:**

**\*\*Environmental Sustainability\*\***: Chapala's natural resources, especially Lake Chapala, must be protected through regulations, conservation efforts, and sustainable water use practices. Ecotourism and environmental education can play a pivotal role in this regard.

**\*\*Socio-cultural Sustainability\*\***: The preservation of local customs, festivals, and traditional lifestyles is essential. Cultural tourism initiatives, such as community-led tours and heritage routes, allow visitors to experience authentic local life while generating income for residents.

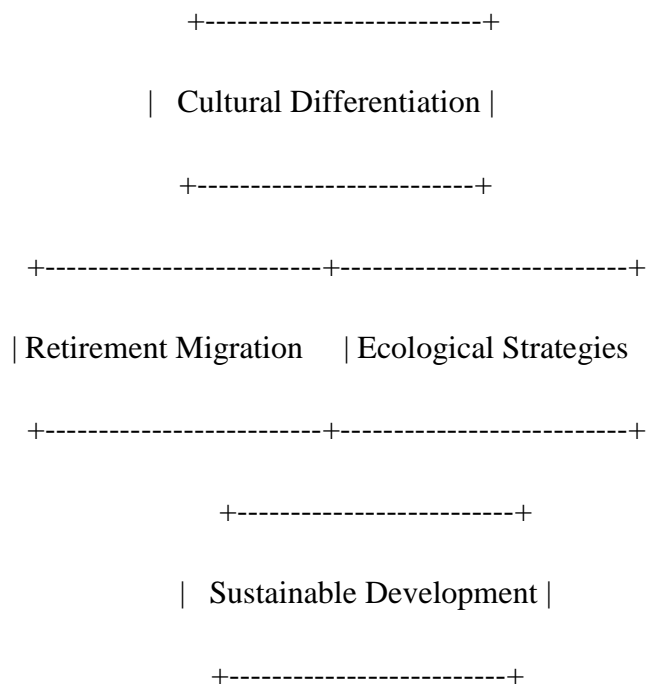
**\*\*Economic Sustainability\*\***: Economic differentiation can be achieved by targeting niche markets such as retirees, bird watchers, and wellness tourists. Local entrepreneurship should be supported to ensure that economic benefits are distributed equitably across the community.

The Resource-Based View (RBV) theory supports this approach by suggesting that sustainable competitive advantage is achieved through the effective use of rare, inimitable, and valuable local resources. For Chapala, these include its lake ecosystem, its vibrant artistic community, and its demographic blend of locals and foreign retirees. By strategically developing and marketing these assets, Chapala can enhance its tourism appeal without compromising its long-term ecological or social well-being.

In summary, differentiation is not just a marketing tactic; it is a foundational element of sustainable development in natural attractions like Chapala. It requires coordinated action from local stakeholders, government authorities, and tourists themselves to realize a vision of tourism that is inclusive, resilient, and regenerative.

### **Local Context: Chapala, Jalisco.**

Lake Chapala's geography supports fishing, agriculture, and ecotourism. The region has also become a destination for thousands of North American retirees seeking affordability and natural beauty (Truly, 2002). Yet, ecological degradation and social inequalities threaten its sustainability (Smith et al., 2020).

**Table 2. Chapala as a complement destination with a differentiation strategic.**

Source: Truly (2002)

### Strategies for Differentiation

Retirement Migration as Economic Lever. Foreign retirees have transformed Chapala's economy, contributing to healthcare, services, and housing markets (Rojas et al., 2014).

**Table 3: Key Differentiation Factors in Chapala**

Differentiation Factor	Description	Opportunities
Retirement Migration	Influx of foreign retirees	High-spending segment
Cultural Heritage	Local traditions, festivals	Cultural tourism
Ecological Tourism	Lake, biodiversity, hiking	Eco-friendly travel
Water Resource Management	Community-driven water plans	Environmental credibility

Source: Rojas, V., LeBlanc, H., & Sunil, T. (2014)

## **Cultural Tourism Development**

Designing cultural routes and integrating local traditions into tourism can boost regional identity and competitiveness (Ochoa et al., 2013).

## **Ecological and Water-Based Differentiation**

Water scarcity and pollution threaten Chapala's ecological future. Community-based water projects and education can promote sustainable tourism and environmental regeneration (Gleason et al., 2007).

## **Case Comparisons and Implications**

The development strategies in Chapala resemble efforts in other regions of Jalisco and Mexico. Arandas' use of religious tourism and La Barca's water-based development model provide parallels (Laure Vidriales et al., 2020) (Gleason et al., 2007).

## **2. Research Method**

2.1 This study follows a qualitative and exploratory research design, with elements of case study methodology. The objective was to examine how differentiation strategies contribute to the sustainable development of Chapala, Jalisco, as a natural tourist attraction. The research focuses on identifying patterns, perceptions, and development pathways from key stakeholders involved in tourism, local governance, and community-based initiatives.

### **2.2 Study Area**

The research was conducted in Chapala county, Jalisco, México, located on the northern shore of Lake Chapala—the largest freshwater lake in the country. The area is known for its ecological, cultural, and recreational value, making it a relevant site for analyzing differentiation strategies within natural tourism development.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected using a triangulation approach that included the following instruments:

Semi-structured interviews: Conducted with local business owners, government officials, community leaders, and tourism service providers (n=20). Interviews were recorded and transcribed with informed consent.

- Participant observation: Field visits to key tourism zones in Chapala, including Ajijic, Malecon, and ecological reserves, with field notes and photographic documentation.

- Document analysis: Review of municipal development plans, tourism promotion materials, environmental reports, and regional economic data from 2018–2024.

Tourism involves economic, sociological, environmental, and cultural variables—interacting under the concept of “tourism territorialization.” It significantly impacts local communities, involving not just entrepreneurs and tourists but also the community and political actors.

## **2.4 Differentiation as an Alternative Tourism Product Strategy**

Tourism influences the territorial organization. Applying Porter's Comparative Advantage Theory, Jalisco's options include cost leadership and differentiation. This study focuses on Chapala's differentiation strategy—a competitive tactic for securing a defensible market position and achieving above-average returns within the tourism industry.

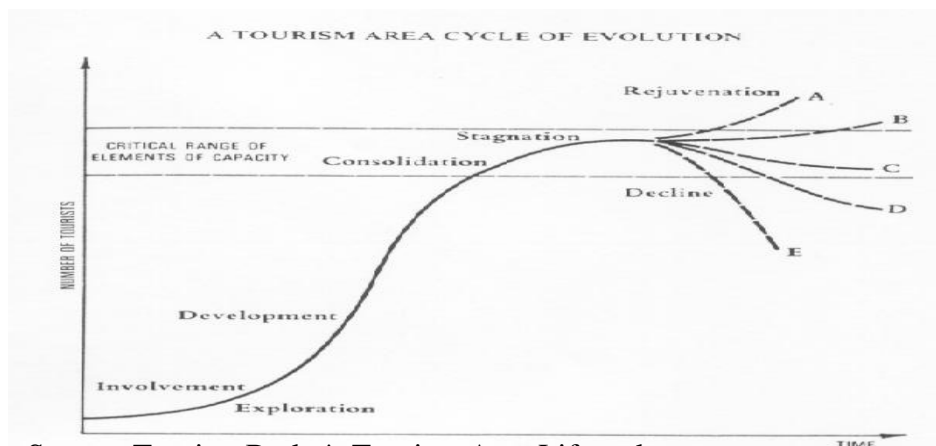
Unlike other municipalities offering sun and beach, religious, commercial, or rural tourism, Chapala offers an alternative nature tourism product centered around Lake Chapala.

Lake Chapala is well-positioned as an alternative tourism destination, embodying Porter's concept of Competitive Advantage through differentiation. This positions Chapala uniquely in Jalisco and the broader western region of Mexico.

## **2.5 Innovation as a Strategy for a Mature Tourist Destination**

Chapala is considered a mature destination, as per Butler's (1980) tourism lifecycle model. At this stage, destinations face two options: decline or rejuvenation. Strategic changes are necessary to revitalize Chapala's offerings—for example, renewing its central boardwalk and plaza.



**Figure 1: Butler's Model of the Tourism Area Lifecycle.**

Source: Tourists Butler's Tourism Area Lifecycle

Butler's model outlines stages: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, and maturity. From maturity, destinations may stagnate or rejuvenate. Without tangible and intangible resource investment, destinations risk stagnation.

Butler's model outlines stages: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, and maturity. From maturity, destinations may stagnate or rejuvenate. Without tangible and intangible resource investment, destinations risk stagnation.

### 3. Results and Analysis

The analysis suggests that Chapala holds untapped potential for becoming a leader in sustainable and alternative tourism in western Mexico. By focusing on differentiation through nature-based experiences, and leveraging its unique ecological and cultural assets, Chapala can stand out from other destinations in the state.

Local stakeholders, including tourism entrepreneurs, civil society, and municipal authorities, show a willingness to collaborate, provided that sustainable and inclusive planning is ensured. This alignment is essential for executing a rejuvenation strategy effectively. However, there are challenges. Funding and political continuity remain significant concerns. Without integrated municipal and state-level coordination, and without embedding the strategy within a long-term policy framework, implementation risks being partial or short-lived.

The integration into the Pueblos Mágicos program, if handled carefully and with attention to local identity, could bring greater visibility and funding to Chapala's efforts.

### 3.1. Recommendations

- Develop a Cultural-Eco Route: Link key natural and cultural sites around Lake Chapala into a structured tour.
- Promote Community-Based Water Stewardship: Empower local groups in managing and branding water sustainability.
- Design Retiree-Inclusive Infrastructure: Tailor health, mobility, and cultural services to international residents.

### 4. Conclusion

Chapala stands at a pivotal moment where its natural charm, cultural heritage, and demographic composition present both challenges and remarkable opportunities for sustainable development. By adopting a differentiation strategy that is deeply grounded in sustainability principles, Chapala can redefine its trajectory from a conventional tourist destination to a model of ecological and cultural resilience.

Differentiation allows Chapala to carve out a unique niche in the broader tourism landscape. Leveraging its strengths—the ecological importance of Lake Chapala, its established expatriate community, and its rich traditions—can set the foundation for a thriving, inclusive economy that benefits residents and visitors alike. At the same time, this strategy must avoid the pitfalls of over-commercialization and cultural homogenization, which can erode the very assets that make Chapala distinctive.

To ensure success, it is crucial for local authorities, community members, private stakeholders, and international actors to engage in collaborative planning and management. Policies must support environmental protection, facilitate cultural exchange, and promote local entrepreneurship. Educational programs and awareness campaigns should also be instituted to foster a deeper understanding of sustainability among all stakeholders.

Furthermore, continued research and monitoring are essential. Understanding the ecological health of Lake Chapala, the social dynamics of migration, and the evolving preferences of tourists will help refine differentiation strategies and adapt them to emerging challenges. As climate change, global mobility, and digital connectivity reshape travel behaviors, Chapala must remain agile and forward-thinking.

in conclusion, differentiation offers Chapala a powerful, strategic pathway to holistic development. When rooted in sustainability, it has the potential to transform the region into a beacon of responsible tourism and a vibrant, inclusive community that respects its past while embracing a future of shared prosperity.

## References

- [1] Andari, R., I., W., I., G., & Sukawati, T. (2022). The strength of local wisdom values as a differentiation strategy in creating sustainable tourism competitiveness.
- [2] Arya, K.S., "Analysis and Simplification of Three-Dimensional Space Vector PWM for Three-Phase Four-Leg Inverters," *IEEE Transactions on Industrial Electronics*, vol. 58, pp. 450-464, Feb 2011.
- [3] Berto, M.C. and Vruce K., "Implementation of a Fuzzy PI Controller for Speed Control of Induction Motors Using FPGA," *Journal of Power Electronics*, vol. 10, pp. 65-71, 2010.
- [4] Gleason, J., Cordova, F., et al. (2007). Water as a detonator of a model of communitarian sustainable development.
- [5] Laure Vidriales, A., et al. (2020). Tourist route in Arandas as a religious and cultural destination.
- [6] Newmark, P. "Common Mode Circulating Current Control of Interleaved Three-Phase Two-Level Voltage-Source Converters with Discontinuous Space-Vector Modulation," *2009 IEEE Energy Conversion Congress and Exposition, Vols 1-6*, pp. 3906-3912, 2009.
- [7] Ochoa, P., Vega, C., & Tolentino, T. D. M. (2013). Proposal for designing cultural touristic routes.
- [8] Rojas, V., LeBlanc, H., & Sunil, T. (2014). US Retirement Migration to Mexico.
- [9] Smith, C. D., Jackson, K., et al. (2020). Lack of safe drinking water for Lake Chapala Basin communities.
- [10] Truly, D. (2002). International retirement migration and tourism along the Lake Chapala Riviera.
- [11] Zed, Yinhai. "A Novel SVPWM Modulation Scheme," in *Applied Power Electronics Conference and Exposition, 2009. APEC 2009. Twenty-Fourth Annual IEEE*, 2009, pp. 128-131.