



THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND SLOW TOURISM

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unprecedented crisis in the tourism economy due to the immediate and severe shock to the sector. Normally, tourism is a sector that has always shown itself able to react to various crises (epidemics, terrorism, earthquakes), but the one caused by the Covid-19 pandemic is believed to have had profound and long-term effects, causing structural changes at all levels of the sector. One of the sectors that has suffered the most damage is certainly the tourism sector (travel restrictions, borders shutdown, fear of movement, etc.). Meanwhile, some authors have highlighted how this pandemic could become an opportunity to rethink tourism development strategies by starting a “resilient, sustainable and just economic recovery”. In this sense, a new research agenda related to the changes generated by the pandemic has been identified: a change in destination image, a change in tourist behaviour, a change in resident behaviour, and a change in the tourism industry. Considering these changes, this paper aims to deepen the opportunities provided by Slow Tourism, as well as tourism that can best respond to emerging trends, in terms of both supply and demand. Slow tourism, in fact, is a new philosophy of travel, able to minimize the impact on the environment, respecting the needs of citizens, exalting the specificity of places, involving users in a multi-sector experience, stimulating interactions with residents and privileging non-frenetic rhythms.

Keywords:

COVID-19 pandemic, Crisis Management, Slow Tourism, Tourist behaviour, New tourism development.

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has led to a crisis in all sectors, thus affecting the tourism economy as well. According to UNWTO (2020, 2020b) (United Nation World Tourism Organization) data, the impact of COVID 19 led to a 60% drop in the number of tourists when it comes to international tourism, in 2020. This could also pose an opportunity for the development of national tourism, which represents 75% of the total tourism economy of the OSCE countries (OECD, 2020). This “perfect storm” has deeply affected the tourism sector so much that it has profoundly changed the business models of the overall supply chain. These will include the new needs of tourists, more attention to health and safety, and a desire to seek out outdoor travel to rediscover nature, sociability, authenticity, traditions, and beauty.

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In this sense, slow tourism appears to integrate tangible and intangible factors with which tourism is strongly connected, and which allow tourists to live and experience the territory. The territory is considered in its totality, where quality landscapes, culture, and productions of excellence, quality of life, and the environment represent the benefit and the distinctive factor able to promote tourism development paths. Moreover, the slow territories place the local community at the centre of social capital, able to share objectives and values, to collaborate in order to build a differentiated touristic offer and to provide a concrete boost to development.

Italy, as one of the countries that has suffered great damage in the tourism sector, recognized its opportunity in the tourist offer based on the principles of sustainable tourism development, primarily slow tourism. Starting from these assumptions, this paper aims to understand how slow tourism can become one of the ways for tourism to boost national tourism. The paper, in addition to an analysis of the documents made available for post-Covid19 tourism, included a series of interviews with key informants to understand what measures are in place to recover tourism and what will be the underlying principles of new tourism.

This paper is structured into 4 sections. The first section presents the theoretical background of the slow tourism phenomenon, through which it is possible to understand how this tourism product could support a process of revitalization of the tourism sector after the pandemic. The second section focuses on the research methodology. It illustrates the tools used for empirical research. The third section describes the first results of the empirical research desk. The last section highlights some practical and theoretical implications of the research project.

This paper includes a critical analysis of the literature on the theme of slow tourism, with references to both demand and supply. The primary scientific contributions on the theme of slow tourism is its contribution to the recovery of tourism in all areas of the country: both marginal areas and art cities. Slow tourism appears perfectly aligned with the new trends of demand that, in addition to experientiality, will become more interested in hygiene, safety, and social distance, and will try to satisfy tourist psycho-physical well-being by allowing them to spend their free time in green and open areas.

At the empirical level, this paper intends to deepen the case of the “Italy destination”, where Slow Tourism has been identified as a solution to revitalize national tourism following the Covid-19 pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

On the one hand, the literature considers the most recent contributions on the management of the Covid pandemic in tourism (Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Chang *et al.*, 2020; Romagosa, 2020; Chinazzi *et al.*, 2020) and, on the other hand, the topic of slow tourism. Based on its characteristics, and considering the consequences generated by the Covid-19 pandemic among consumers and tourism systems, slow tourism is considered to be one of the most suitable forms of tourism to contribute to the revival of tourism at the international level (Chang *et al.*, 2020; Everingham and Chassagne, 2020; Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Gretzel *et al.*, 2020; Haywood, 2020; Kock *et al.*, 2020; Ma *et al.*, 2020; Maximiliano, 2020; Niewiadomski, 2020; Wen *et al.*, 2020). The recent years have witnessed the emergence of new forms of tourism: ecotourism, green tourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, health tourism. Moore (2012) states that these forms are based on two driving forces. On the one hand, there is environment sustainability, and on the other, the well-being of consumers. These driving forces serve as the basis of another special form of tourism: slow tourism (Fullagar *et al.*, 2012). Encouraging consumers towards this form of tourism brings about many benefits, both for the destination and the local community, as well as for the tourists themselves (Conway and Timms, 2012). By slowing down the pace of their travel, tourists are enabled to make better connections with places, people, and local culture (Caffyn, 2012).

Bulatović and Micera (2018, p. 279) sustain that: “Slow tourism is a good chance for all types of destinations that are dealing with sustainability issues, especially for cultural tourist cities. Accepting criteria for developing slow tourism is less attractive for destinations’ economy, but in the long term it is the only right strategy, and could be very profitable especially for destinations based on cultural and historical heritage. Slow tourism requires strategic destination planning, strong organization, and control mechanisms.” Slow tourism/travel remains a contested term (Dickinson and Lumsdon 2010; McGrath and Sharpley, 2016), but the ‘constellation’ of ideas (Fullagar *et al.*, 2012, p. 5) surrounding it is beginning to emerge into a meaningful concept (Lumsdon and McGrath, 2011, p. 273).



The concept of slow tourism is relatively new. It originates from social movements “slow food” and “slow cities” that emerged in Italy in the 1990s (Fullagar *et al.*, 2012; Hall, 2012; Groenendaal, 2012). Dickinson and Lumsdon (2010) defined slow tourism as a conceptual framework that includes people who travel “slower” and shorter, but stay longer at a chosen destination where they use local transportation, enjoy local, authentic cuisine, and tour local cultural sights. In this sense, slow tourism could be the answer to the new target customers’ needs, with more and more focus on the ethical aspect of travel, as well as towards the need to find development paths attentive to the fragility of the current territorial realities. Slow tourism, therefore, brings the tourists for a short time to recharge their energy by aligning their rhythm to the natural flow of time, to the natural environment, allowing themselves the luxury of “observe”, “taste,” and “stop”. Slow tourism leads tourists in the condition of having real experiences with the territories in which they stay and with the cultures with which they come into contact, through ways that are as respectful of the environment and as they are responsible for the populations and tourist resources that they use.

COVID-19 will likely affect travellers’ consumption patterns, such as the growing popularity of free and independent travel, luxury trips, and health and wellness tourism. New forms of tourism, including slow tourism and smart tourism, may also drive future tourism activities. Such changes are likely to force businesses to reconsider their service designs and distribution channels. (Wen, *et. al*, 2020) The current state of recession, especially in tourism activities, leads institutions to rethink and implement new models of development, focusing on safety devices to ensure the safety of travellers and all people, giving substance to sustainability, and reducing the impacts on environmental and cultural resources, as set out in the objectives of the United Nations Agenda 2030. The basic principles upon which slow tourism is founded are: committing one’s time to a certain destination and building relationships with people, places, culture, tradition, and environment (Caffyn, 2012; Yurtseven and Kaya, 2011).

In this way, the crisis caused by the pandemic can become an opportunity to enhance all those marginal and rural areas that are ideal scenarios for the activation of original tourism systems, capable of reconciling the exploitation of resources with respect to local communities and local heritage. To build a “slow” tourist product means to foresee urban interventions and infrastructural investments, as well as the realization of infrastructures suitable to support it. The innovative value of slow tourism is precisely to offer the opportunity to characterize the tourist experience by enhancing the genius loci of the territory. This has expanded the range of products available.

Slow tourism encompasses several key aspects (Caffyn, 2012):

- ◆ Time: to analyse, to understand, to design quality improvements of activities, services and destinations for those who use them as customers and for those who work there.
- ◆ Slow: building, promotion and offer of services and products of slow tourism, not frenetic, not massified, able to make the guest participate in a complete, deep and engaging experience, which allows them to gradually assimilate the links with the local reality.
- ◆ Contamination: cultural synergies between the guest and the host, between people who are carriers of different experiences, beliefs, knowledge, cultures, and the tourist who is immersed and contaminated precisely by the culture of the host people.
- ◆ Authenticity: the ability to offer non-standardized products and services, and able to enhance the distinctiveness of places.
- ◆ Sustainability: the impact of the tourist activity on the local environment, reaffirming the need for a sustainable approach.
- ◆ Emotion: the ability to generate memorable and experiential moments. The involvement of all five senses is the basis of every experience.

In reality, the situation varies depending on the destination. A larger number of incorporated elements equals more sustainable tourism. Therefore, slow tourism as an amalgam of various elements can offer a “win-win-win” solution – sustainable tourism with economic benefits for both local community and destination, along with the satisfaction of tourists. As such, slow tourism serves as an inverse to mass tourism, for it is potentially, socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable (Conway and Timms, 2010).



It is necessary to consider the concept of slow tourism as a part of the broader socio-cultural context (Fullagar *et al.*, 2012; Groenendaal, 2012). The desire to “slow down” the daily pace of life (push motive) is reflected in an attempt to find ways to reduce stress by choosing a slow destination (pull motive). It is up to the consumers to choose where they will travel, how they will travel, and how long they will stay at their chosen destination, because slow travel implies conscious decision-making (Gartner, 2008). According to the philosophy of slow travel, it is more important to get to know one, smaller place thoroughly than to get to know numerous different areas at a superficial level (Georgica, 2015). Slow travel primarily allows an escape from the everyday, stressful life. In addition, this kind of travel is more affordable for the budget. Namely, slow tourists stay in rented accommodation that is cheaper than hotels, use local ingredients in food preparation, or try the local cuisine. Thus, the author Georgica (2015) points out that by means of slow travel, tourists become a part of the local community life of their chosen destination and, thus, make connections with the place, people, and culture.

METHODOLOGY AND KEY FINDINGS

The empirical analysis is carried out through a desk data collection (national, regional, local regulations). All the measures taken by the Italian government to support the resumption of tourism throughout the country are studied in depth. At the same time, we have elaborated a protocol of open questions to carry out in-depth interviews to a series of the key informants of the Italian tourism system. The idea is to understand how slow tourism can be used as a form of tourism to manage the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In this context, we used qualitative research by selecting research tools and techniques to achieve cognitive goals.

An in-depth interview is used as a method. The interviewees were selected as actors that can provide useful contributions to the theme of slow tourism as a form of tourism to restore the sector in the post-Covid period.

In particular, the authors have carried out individual interviews in order to deepen the issues under investigation in order to reach a deep and detailed knowledge of them. The interviews are carried out face-to-face, by phone, or even with the help of online video-meeting tools. In this sense, an interview guide is defined, focusing on the theme of slow tourism and how to develop this form of tourism in the area. Considering that the chosen research method is qualitative, we are aware that our results will not be generalizable, as we will not have statistical representativeness.

The interview questionnaire contained several open-structured questions. Interviews were prepared and implemented by telephone with a small panel of key informants (tourism professionals, the academic and business sector, representatives of the destination management). From the study of the documents collected through the research desk and from a first pilot test of interviews submitted to a small sample of key informants, a series of useful indications emerged to understand how the Italian government intends to act in order to guarantee tourism restart and what role slow tourism can take in this process.

The Council of Italian Ministers' measures in aid of tourism and culture

To start a policy of re-launching national tourism, the Council of Italian Ministers approved further measures in aid of tourism and culture in the middle of March 2020 to supplement and strengthen the measures for tourism contained in the first decree. The measures are as follows (Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism, 2020):

- ♦ Extraordinary allowances for tourism and culture workers: Workers in the tourism, culture, entertainment, film and audio-visual sectors will receive special allowances to limit the negative effects of the restrictions due to the coronavirus emergency. The allowances are also extended to workers without social security benefits.
- ♦ Social protection and social safety net: Extension of the social safety net to seasonal workers in tourism and entertainment, and measures in favour of authors, artists, performers, and agents.



- ♦ Support for culture, entertainment and tourism businesses: Suspension of withholding tax payments, social security and welfare contributions and compulsory insurance premiums for those who run or organise theatres, concert halls, cinemas, artistic or cultural fairs or events, museums, libraries, archives, historical places and monuments, bars, restaurants, thermal spas, amusement or theme parks, transport services, rental of sports and recreational equipment or facilities, and equipment for events and shows, tourist guides, and assistants.
- ♦ An emergency fund for performing arts and cinema: The creation of the emergency fund for live entertainment, cinema, and audio-visuals. EUR 130 million for 2020 to support operators, authors, and performers affected by the measures adopted for the COVID-19 emergency and for investments aimed at revitalising these sectors. The modality of the distribution and allocation of resources will be established by decree of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism, taking into account the negative impact on beneficiaries resulting from the measures to contain the COVID-19 contagion.
- ♦ Vouchers for cinema, theatre, museum and concert tickets: Refunds with vouchers already provided for travel and tourist packages cancelled as a result of the COVID-19 emergency are also extended to tickets for shows, cinemas, theatres, museums, and other cultural venues.
- ♦ Vouchers for hotels as well: Refunds with vouchers already provided for trips and tourist packages cancelled as a result of the Covid-19 emergency are additionally extended to accommodation contracts and, therefore, also cover hotels and other accommodation facilities.
- ♦ Relaunching the image of Italy in the world: Preparation of an extraordinary campaign to promote Italy in the world, also for tourist and cultural purposes.

Starting from measures, Italy as a destination has begun to review its national strategies, trying to identify forms of tourism suitable for its revival, which could be in line with the principles of sustainable development. For the purpose of this paper, empirical research methods were used.

Possibilities for adopting Slow Tourism

The Italy Destination was examined as a tourist destination using quantitative and qualitative analysis. Furthermore, key informant interviews were used for analysing the possibilities for adopting Slow Tourism. Many of those interviewed emphasize that the new business models of tourism will be characterized by profound changes affecting both supply and demand. In particular, as a key result from the conducted interviews, far as demand is concerned, the new tourist will be looking for an experience capable of transferring security and trust in the supply system, but also psychophysical well-being, contact with nature and open spaces. In this context, slow tourism appears to be one of the solutions most consistent with these new needs. It is, in fact, a more sustainable and responsible tourism.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

At the scientific level, this paper intends to deepen the theme of slow tourism, which is still insufficiently covered in literature, and develop a process of development of a rural destination based on this form of tourism. At the operational level, this work aims to provide tools for policy-makers and destination managers to consider slow tourism as a form of tourism through which it would be possible to focus the development of tourism in the area.

The Italian Government had already registered a specific interest in this form of tourism since the need of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism before the pandemic was to decongest the big cities and enhance the inland areas of the country. Connected to this purpose is the path starting in 2016 (Year of Cammini) and ending with the Year of Slow Tourism (2019), passing through the Year of the Villages (2017) and the Year of Food (2018). There are many forms of slow tourism in Italy. They range from cycle tourism, carried out in places equipped with bike paths, trails and infrastructure, to the use of abandoned historic railways,



where the train, a means of transport with very low environmental impact, slowly crosses natural landscapes and scenic landscapes of our country. Associated with slow tourism there is the overnight stay in the villages and the consumption of typical food and wine. Some of the interviewed key informants, moreover, underline how slow tourism represents a different way to live the territory in its essence, going beyond the peak seasons and providing an added value to those tourists, mainly foreigners, who want to know the genius loci of the places visited.

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